

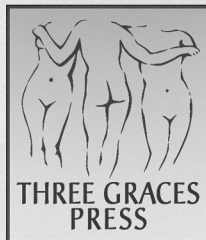


ALSO BY DEREK SWANNSON

Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground

Crash Gordon and the Revelations from Big Sur

The Snowden Avalanche



New York



CRASH GORDON

and the Mysteries of Kingsburg

DEREK  SWANNSON

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For my three graces

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Maybe this world is some other planet's hell.

—Aldous Huxley



PROLOGUE

*Tiny Terrors
in a Tiny Town*

*AND A MAN'S FOES SHALL BE THEY OF HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD.
—MATTHEW 10:36*



WHIZ KID

Picture six-year-old Gordon Swannson skulking along a shag carpeted hallway in the predawn stillness of a suburban ranch house. Gordon has dark, raccoonish eyes and a wheeze that would frighten almost any mother—except his own. He takes furtive gulps of air like an oxygen-coveting little thief. He's asthmatic. He's a boy genius. He taught himself to read before the age of three and now he's already devouring college textbooks, but only in the fields that interest him: Dinosaurs, Geology, Abnormal Psych.... He could spot a *Parasaurolophus* from a mile away. He knows why tectonic plates shift and how igneous rock formations are made. He's the youngest boy ever to diagnose himself with Asperger's syndrome, just by reading about it.

But maybe boy genius isn't quite the right term for him. Maybe he's more of an idiot savant. Consider the evidence. The seat of his fuzzy blue inflammable pajama suit is sporting charred brown tiger stripes—the unfortunate aftermath of a bedwetting incident that he tried to conceal by draping his sodden PJs on top of the electric wall heater in the bathroom. He watched in fascination as the heater's coils turned an urgent orange. *These'll be dry in no time*, he thought. Then the stench of roasting urine gave him away.

There's also this intellectually damning fact: he still believes in the Easter Bunny. That's why he's sneaking around in his charbroiled pajama pants. It's Easter Sunday, 1973, and Gordon wants compensation. He knows he's a wheezy little bastard, every parent's nightmare. He's already been in the hospital for asthma at least a dozen times—and he's about to go in again. His life so far has been miserable, but he's sworn to God that he'll try to make the best of it. He thinks the least God can do in return is to let him get a look at the Easter Bunny.

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That's why he's up so early. Gordon is convinced the Easter Bunny delivers his gifts under the cloak of darkness—like Santa Claus... or Dracula. At least that's his best guess.

Gordon tiptoes out of the hallway into the den, where moonlight ghosts through floor-to-ceiling curtains hiding sliding glass doors that open onto the backyard patio. He can just barely make out a Kelly green dime-store Easter basket sitting on the fireplace bench next to the andirons. It's an electric fireplace with ceramic logs and the andirons are there just for show. Gordon turns on the fireplace so he can see better, experiencing a little *déjà vu* in the light of the fake orange flames. He rummages through the basket's squiggly cellophane grass, emerging with a large chocolate Easter Bunny, several hard-boiled eggs that he dyed with his grandmother the previous evening, and a miraculous, miniature stuffed Smokey the Bear.

Although Gordon's world is full of advertisements featuring anthropomorphic animals—think Charlie the Tuna, Tony the Tiger, and Mickey Mouse, for starters—Smokey the Bear is far and away his favorite. Why? Because Smokey is the only one who gives him a deep and somehow profoundly satisfying sense of existential responsibility. "Only *you* can prevent forest fires." Not a single forest fire has ravaged the town of Kingsburg, California, from the day he was born there, and Gordon is not averse to taking full credit for that fact.

Nevermind that there aren't any forests in Kingsburg. It's all farmland—*The Raisin Capital of the World*, actually. But there haven't been any hellacious, earth-scorching vineyard fires, either... thanks to Gordon.

The curious snuffling of his basset hound, Sam (short for Samantha) rises to Gordon's ears from the low corner of the sliding glass door nearest the fireplace. Sam is narcoleptic. Any loud noise or too much excitement will cause her to fall into a sudden sleep, an instant paralysis of dreaming. Basset hounds being low to the ground, she never hurts herself. If she's running, playing fetch, and she hears a garbage can clang or a truck backfire, she simply falls on her side, skidding to a halt on one of her long, floppy brown ears. After a few minutes of REM sleep she's back up again, feeling fine, wagging her tail as if nothing happened. Gordon adores the dog. There are times when he thinks Sam is the only living creature in the whole world that

truly loves and understands him. This is one of those times. He gets down on his hands and knees and peeks through the curtain, finding himself staring into Sam's round brown eyes. Sam returns his gaze with a look of abject loyalty and incomprehension. She wags her tail, hoping it's Alpo time. She paws at the nose-marked glass, asking to be let in. Gordon mistakes these gestures for sympathy and affection.

"Sam," he whispers, almost bringing tears to his eyes with his own pathos, "when I grow up, I'm gonna marry you... if I don't die first." Once again, Gordon has landed squarely on the idiot side of the idiot savant equation. At least on this occasion no one capable of criticism is around to witness it. Sam merely licks her chops in response. She knows she only gets fed once a day, at the same hour every evening, but a dog can dream, can't she?

Gordon dives deep into reveries of married life with a basset hound. Would Sam still let him use a leash? How would she look in a bridal gown? Would she be allowed to wear white, or would getting humped by the Rowley's Doberman last April count against her? Etcetera. Then a twinkling in the camellia bush beyond Sam's wagging tail distracts him. Colored lights are flitting around in there, like Tinkerbell's spark-farting fluttering at the beginning of each new television episode of *The Wonderful World of Disney*. Can camellias erupt in spontaneous combustion?

Airborne splashes of neon pink, tungsten blue, and electric yellow suddenly leap from the bush and dance about in the cool night air, coalescing into the shape of a cartoon rabbit. The eerie, faceless rabbit noiselessly bounces across the cement patio on long hind paws, hopping from one side to the other. As it hops closer, it whirls apart into separate splashes of light; then its individual components—ears, legs, palpitating nose, fluffy tail—suddenly reassemble into a rabbit again. Gordon's heart is full of wonder, but his mind is full of dread. He's always been prone to daydreaming, but this is more like a paranoid-schizophrenic break with reality. It scares him. Nevertheless, he decides to invite the Easter Bunny in.

Wheezing, tongue curling out the corner of his mouth in determination, Gordon fumbles with the grey plastic lock on the sliding glass door. Sam, meanwhile, manages a growl as the apparition nears, then falls on her side in a fit of narcolepsy. Finally, the lock

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clicks free and Gordon rolls aside the door on its sandy aluminum track. It sticks after traveling a length of about eighteen inches, but that's wide enough to greet the mystery. Gordon opens his arms for an embrace. There's a moment of beatitude—or something very much like it. God, after all, has answered his prayers. Then the Easter Bunny lunges through the curtains and hurls him to the floor, pummeling poor Gordon in a frantic show of malevolent colored lights.



No one ever believed Gordon's version of what happened that day. Everyone said he must have been hallucinating. It was strange, thought Gordon, how adamant they all were. How they wouldn't even give him the benefit of the doubt. It was as if they were all afraid of something—the truth, perhaps. What it all boiled down to was this:

No one wanted to hear that the Easter Bunny had beat the crap out of him.

Toward the conclusion of that Easter Sunday—late evening in the Kingsburg Memorial Hospital, under an oxygen tent—Gordon contemplates his sorry state. He feels like he's drowning, trying to breathe from under a bag of wet feathers. Through the condensation beading on the inside of the clear plastic tent, he can just barely make out his loyal old grandmother, half-asleep in a chair. An IV drip runs into Gordon's skinny, blue-veined arm. He feels a dull ache where the needle pokes into the crook of his elbow, the pinching stickiness of adhesive tape holding his wrist to a splint.

There's more tape holding a tube to his chest. A doctor had come by earlier to tell Gordon that a pneumothorax had collapsed his right lung. Gordon had sworn that was where the damn rabbit bit him. But would anyone listen to him? No. "Bunnies are nice," the doctor said. "The hell they are," said Gordon. His Grandma Helen was so disturbed by what he told her that she gave Gordon a book of Bible stories to read, fearing his soul might be in jeopardy.

The book is a cheap, illustrated Sunday school edition with oversized type. Its laminated front cover depicts a round-bellied Mary on a donkey being led by a morose Joseph, who is probably wondering

how his wife came to be with child without allowing him to do the begetting. The Star of Bethlehem shines down on them both from above the title: *A Young Lad's Book of Bible Stories*. Gordon prefers his fairy tales to come from the Brothers Grimm. He thumbs through the book out of sheer boredom. But then his attention is drawn to a kitschy illustration of a small, bandaged boy, very much like himself (except for a too-perfect haircut), lying unconscious in a hospital bed with his right arm upraised and a radiant Jesus attending him.

The text that accompanies the illustration tells the sad tale of Little Toby, a boy like any other, who is run over by a large Buick while riding his bike across a bridge in a sleet storm. Little Toby is knocked forty feet in the air and lands in the river, where a kindly policeman fishes him out (*at least he wasn't eaten by piranhas*, thinks Gordon, who has a morbid and ungovernable imagination). The policeman calls an ambulance to come and cart Little Toby off to the hospital, where it is discovered that he has thirty-three broken bones and a case of double pneumonia. Things look bad for Little Toby. So bad, in fact, that when he regains consciousness in the middle of the night, with no one around to comfort him, he gets a tad hysterical. He holds up his broken right arm and prays to Jesus, asking to be taken to heaven. Holding up the right arm is somehow crucial, according to the book. Anyway, it gets the Son of God's attention. Jesus swoops right down in a blaze of holiness and rockets Little Toby off to Paradise. End of story.

Self-pitying tears well in Gordon's eyes as he sets the book aside. Then he does something he's never done with any sort of sincerity before: he asks Jesus into his heart. And of course he props up his right arm before he goes off to sleep. Gordon desperately wants to leave his earthly existence behind. Who wouldn't, after getting his ass kicked by the Easter Bunny?

That night Gordon has a dream he's had many times before. It starts out like an old silent movie: a black title card flickers with implosions of dust and white scratches as it spells out *Marauder in the Bog*, or perhaps *Murder in the Jungle*—Gordon can never quite remember for sure. He hears an ominous gypsy song as the dream-film opens on a bayou shack under coal-black skies, surrounded by tall reeds swaying in the moonlight. Gordon lives in the shack with his parents, who just happen to be cartoon characters—the mother and father from the

comic strip, "Dennis the Menace." Gordon, not a cartoon, knows he must run away. He leaves the security of the shack and ventures out into the cold reeds. They tower above his little blonde head. He looks back over his shoulder and sees, through the shack's window, his cartoon mother serving his cartoon father a cartoon turkey dinner. They don't seem to miss him. Barefoot, unarmed, Gordon wends his way along a muddy path, but soon loses his bearings. Then he hears a rustling and deep, heavy breathing. Terrified, he starts to run, but the path ends in a cul-de-sac. The wall of reeds to his right shudders and parts and the face of a black, furious crocodile-ape roars out at him with a terrible gnashing of teeth.

Gordon wakes up with a scream.

Jesus, that loafer, doesn't show up for Gordon that night. But early the following morning, before Gordon is fully awake, he feels someone clasping the fingers on his upraised right hand. "Hold this," a voice says—not the voice of Jesus, unfortunately, but the voice of his best friend and future nemesis, Jimmy Marrsden. Gordon finds himself holding up a G.I. Joe doll in dirty miniature fatigues. There's an amber-brown, nacreous bald patch on G.I. Joe's head where Jimmy burned him with a magnifying glass. Jimmy backs up and points an imaginary machine gun. "Brrraattt-a-tat-tat!!!" he sputters. Imaginary bullets ricochet down the corridors of the otherwise quiet hospital. G.I. Joe's loose peg of a neck wobbles in Gordon's unsteady grasp and then his shiny head falls to the floor.

Gordon scoots up into a sitting position and wipes away a swath of condensation from inside the oxygen tent. Through the round window he's created, he sees his mother and Mrs. Marrsden on the far side of the room ensconced in aquamarine acrylic chairs. They're wearing spangled pantsuits and oversized Gucci sunglasses that remind Gordon of a close-up photograph of a butterfly's retinas that he saw in a recent issue of *National Geographic*. They murmur to each other in low, sinister tones while puffing on menthol cigarettes. Gordon's grandmother pointedly ignores them, focusing her wrinkled, crimson lipstick scowl on her knitting instead. Just as Gordon registers this maternal tableau, Jimmy jumps up on the bed and peers in at him like a sea monster at a ship's portal. He's a welter of freckles, red ears, belligerent eyes, and unruly brown hair. Gordon shelters his testicles

from Jimmy's bouncing Keds basketball shoes. Keen on creating the impression that he could die at any moment, he greets Jimmy with a quivering half-smile and a tubercular croak.

"Hiya, Gordon!" Jimmy shouts with enthusiasm.

"Hi, Jimmy," Gordon says, then fades back into his pillow, as if even that effort might have cost him a lung.

"How ya doin'?" A question asked while bouncing, with no real concern.

"Not so good...." Gordon assumes an expression of fake piety and picks up the Bible story book he fell asleep with, beckoning to his knitting grandmother: "Grandma Helen?"

Instantly solicitous, Grandma Helen gets to her feet. "What? What is it, sweetie?"

"Why do innocent children suffer and die?"

With tears brimming from her pink-lidded, heavily mascaraed eyes, Grandma Helen leans over and gives Gordon a hug, almost bringing down the oxygen tent around him. "Oh, honey..." she says in that trilling, swoony voice of hers (she reigned as Queen of the 1936 Kingsburg Raisin Parade, and her illustrated likeness graced the packages of Sunny Maid Raisins for the next thirty-three years—hence her flair for histrionics, which Gordon has inherited). Grandma Helen bravely stifles a sob, then says: "I don't know why innocents like you should have to suffer. That's one of life's great mysteries!"

Gordon's mother and Mrs. Marrsden roll their eyes behind their Gucci sunglasses and blow mentholated smoke heavenward.

"You're not that innocent, Gordon," Jimmy pipes up. "You peed on your dog."

"He did *what?*!" Grandma Helen drops Gordon as if he's contaminated.

"You did it, too!"

"Yeah, but at least it wasn't *my* dog."

"Jimmy! *Goddamn* you!" Mrs. Marrsden says.

"Don't worry, mom. Gordon's mom already spanked us for it."

"I really let 'em have it," Gordon's mother concurs.

"Well, good!" Mrs. Marrsden says. "That's good! Now you better get your little butt off that bed, or I'll spank it again."

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Gordon and Jimmy's mothers were ardent believers in capital punishment. They thought of little boys as sociopaths in short pants. There were times when Gordon had to admit there might be some validity to that theory. It was no use pretending he was a saint. He could be spiteful, cowardly, and vain. He'd been known to commit an occasional act that defied morality and reason, just like most other little boys his age. For instance, he really *did* pee on Sam, and he would never understand why he did it. He loved that dog! But Jimmy had a way of making him do things that he would never do on his own.

They'd been up in the old walnut tree in Gordon's backyard looking for aphids and a particularly ugly strain of greenish-yellow caterpillar with blood-red humps (*Schizura concinna*). Sam had seen the boys up there and wanted them to come down and throw sticks for her. To get her point across, she was up on her hind legs with her front paws scrabbling against the tree's trunk, barking at them. It was Jimmy who suggested they pee on her. He made it sound like a delightful new game: *Whiz on the Basset Hound!* And before Gordon had time to think through all the implications of what he was doing, he was right there beside Jimmy on a sturdy branch, doing his best impression of that statue beloved by the Belgian nation, *Mannekin Pis*. As the twin spumes of micturition splashed down on Sam's long basset face, she turned and shambled away. Throwing sticks was now out of the question, apparently. As Gordon watched her go with her white-tipped tail dragging the ground, he felt something deep inside his chest turn to ash and crumple. He wanted to cry long before his mother saw Sam in all her pee-stained wretchedness and marched outside to whip the coils of an egg whisk across the backs of their skinny, sun-browned legs.

That was only the latest of Gordon and Jimmy's excretory adventures; they owed their friendship to a much earlier one. It was actually Gordon's earliest memory. It began on a summer day in Kingsburg, when the asphalt roads were so hot they had turned soft like licorice taffy and walking barefoot on them was not an option. Gordon was almost two and had just graduated to wearing Big Boy underpants—an accomplishment he was quite proud of. His latest slogan, repeated interminably, was: "Only babies wear diapers."

On this particular day, his mother and Mrs. Marrsden had decided to get together in the wading pool in the Marrsden backyard to drink

rum-and-cokes and spread vicious rumors. Gordon's mother wore her hair in a crisp Aqua-Net shellacked bouffant and came sheathed in a one-piece bathing suit of the latest Space Age fabric. She looked like a glamorous poodle groomer from one of the orbiting moons around Saturn. In contrast, Mrs. Marrsden arrived with her black hair in a close-cropped pixie cut, wearing a daring flower print bikini with wide yellow straps that emphasized her enormous, shelf-like bosom. Careful not to spill their drinks, the two women filled the wading pool with water from a stiff green garden hose. Then they told Gordon and Jimmy it was time for them to learn how to swim. Gordon—cutting a heroic figure in the aforementioned Big Boy underpants—thought this was a fantastic idea, and as soon as his mother lowered herself into the pool with a giddy shiver, he was clambering at her side, asking her to help him in. Jimmy, however, needed some coaxing. He was more interested in running around the yard naked, his red swim trunks having proven too constraining. Mrs. Marrsden had to chase him around the swing set a few times before she was able to catch him by the arm and drag him into the pool, where he splashed and yelled like a freshly hatched gargoyle as she got him into his trunks again.

The initial caress of that cool, limpid water against his naked chest was a thrill Gordon hoped he would always remember. He felt free, buoyant, electric, able to breathe in deep lungfuls of crystalline air. His first asthma attack had occurred just a few months earlier, after his mother had left her pet cat, TwinkleToes (six toes on each foot, mangy, invidious), in the playpen with him while she was doing some vacuuming. She found Gordon twenty minutes later with his face pressed against the pen's netting, turning a cyanotic blue, as the cat sat behind him calmly licking its mutant calico feet. Gordon's mother rushed him to the emergency room, where Doctor Brockett gave him a shot of epinephrine, and, after asking a few questions, deduced that Gordon had a severe allergy to cat dander. The good doctor suggested giving TwinkleToes the boot. And although Gordon's mother eventually did send TwinkleToes away (not without misgivings), Gordon's lungs had never been the same. They always felt restricted to some degree—until that first dunk in the wading pool.

Gordon and Jimmy both turned out to be natural swimmers. They crisscrossed the pool, shoving off from one mother to the other,

paddling like happy little tadpoles. Once Gordon looked up, blinking water, expecting to see his mother, and found his hands resting on Mrs. Marrsden's breasts, instead. He felt a little embarrassed about that, but it was also sexy. Mrs. Marrsden simply laughed and shoved him on his way.

Everything seemed to be going along fine—it was the happiest time Gordon could remember having—but then the two mothers shrieked as one and leapt out of the pool, trailing great sheets of water from their swimsuits. Gordon felt himself hoisted into the air by angry hands. He was set down on his feet, hard, and then his mother was bending down in front of him. She looked extremely upset—and it frightened him.

“Gordon,” she said, “did you go Big Job in the pool?”

He couldn't imagine such a thing. “No!” he said emphatically, hoping it would quell his mother's rage.

“Tell the truth. Did you go Big Job in the pool?” She shook him. Her green eyes warned of impending violence.

“No! I didn't!” Gordon declared. And truly, he didn't think he had.

“Then who did?”

Losing his own sense of reason and proportion, Gordon pointed a finger at Mrs. Marrsden, now standing beside the pool with a kitchen strainer. “She did,” he said.

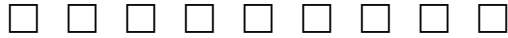
“Oh, I don't think so!” This was said in a rush as Gordon's mother yanked down his pants. Gordon looked to his feet. He didn't want to believe it, but the evidence was clearly there. His body had betrayed him. Five little brown turdlets rested in the soggy crotch of his now permanently disgraced Big Boy underpants. He supposed he wouldn't be wearing *those* again for a while. *Damn!*

The whole situation was so overwhelming that Gordon might have burst into tears if it hadn't been for Jimmy's presence. Even at the age of two, Gordon wanted to play the stoic in front of his peers. He glanced over at Jimmy, to acknowledge his humiliation, but Jimmy was in an odd squat with his back to him, like a Russian weightlifter straining for his first Olympic gold medal. As Gordon watched, a greenish-brown seepage started dripping from beneath Jimmy's red

swim trunks and running in rivulets down the backs of his legs. Gordon knew what was happening even before Jimmy bellowed: “It was me! Jimmy! I went Big Job in the pool!”

Mrs. Marrsden went over and tugged on Jimmy’s elastic waistband, taking a quick peek at his rear end. “I don’t think so, kiddo,” she said. “The turds in the pool are floaters. What you did looks more like leftover guacamole. But nice try, anyway....”

Gordon and Jimmy had been the best of friends ever since.



Two months pass before Gordon’s collapsed lung re-inflates and he’s able to leave the hospital—a long stretch of time in the life of a six-year-old. Gordon spends it getting to know some of the people on the hospital’s staff. There’s Jeff, the male nurse, who brings him old issues of custom car magazines, then chides Gordon for looking at the supercharged, candy-flake-coated Mustangs and Hemi ‘Cudas while ignoring the bikini-clad girls standing next to them. There’s also Gwen, the foxy, long-legged Candy Striper, who unknowingly gives Gordon a clear view of the crotch of her white cotton panties whenever she rises on tip-toe to check the fluid levels in his IV bottles (Jeff’s counsel wasn’t lost on him, after all...). He also becomes acquainted with Bethanny, the overweight night nurse (very sympathetic about nightmares), Oscar, the janitor (“You should see the crap I have to pick up. It’s disgusting!”), and Rosaria, the ancient, decrepit Mexican woman who gives him his sponge baths (always handing him a soapy rag and averting her eyes while he washes his “special part down there”).

And then there’s suave Doctor Brockett, Gordon’s hero, who looks like Spock on *Star Trek*, but without the pointy ears. Doctor Brockett always warms up his stethoscope by blowing on it before he puts it on a patient’s chest, and he once sternly told Gordon’s mother he would give *her* all the shots, instead of Gordon, if she didn’t stop smoking around her asthmatic son. For those reasons and many others, Gordon thinks Doctor Brockett is one of the most admirable, intelligent adults he’s ever met.

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(Unfortunately, in the months ahead, Doctor Brockett will become addicted to something Gordon's mother and Mrs. Marrsden refer to as "Happy Pills." He will get arrested for driving his red Alfa Romeo on the wrong side of the road at eighty miles an hour while on his way out to Riverland to go water-skiing. In the Police Blotter write-up in the following week's issue of *The Kingsburg Recorder*, it will be noted that two braless hippie girls and a bucket of Colonel Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken accompanied the doctor on his wild ride. It's an embarrassing situation to find oneself in, but Doctor Brockett will do the responsible thing and pay his bail, then check himself in to a drug rehab clinic in Fresno. There, while detoxifying, he will be approached by a coalition of concerned citizens, including several members of the Kingsburg city council. They'll suggest it might be time for Doctor Brockett to abandon his well-established medical practice and relocate to a place like New York or San Francisco, where moral laxity such as his will perhaps be better tolerated. Kingsburg, they'll imply, is too small a town to handle so large a scandal. The upshot of all this is that Gordon will get stuck with a jolly, balding, bow-tie-wearing pediatrician named Doctor Smiley, whom he'll grow to loathe, while his childhood idol, Doctor Brockett—the adult he most wants to emulate—is never to be seen nor heard from again.)

Gordon's seventh birthday arrives while he's still in the hospital. Only his Grandma Helen makes note of it, giving him a pair of bright blue galoshes and a matching rain hat, along with the Merck Manual he'd requested. Gordon's mother and father are out-of-town. In Spain, actually, going to bullfights. His father won the trip by selling a record number of Westinghouse air conditioners. The Swannsons own a hardware store that has a local monopoly on air conditioners—and it gets hot in Kingsburg. So hot that Gordon's father wins one of those trips just about every year.

Gordon wishes he were in Spain, too, instead of stuck in a boring old hospital. At least the oxygen tent has been put away, so he can watch television, but at this hour there's nothing on but soap operas. To pass the time, Gordon recalls images from the travel brochures his parents left lying around the house. He imagines himself in Madrid. He sees himself wandering the marble halls of the Prado, passing by the

Titians, Goyas, and El Grecos. Finally, he encounters Hieronymus Bosch's triptych: *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Seeing Bosch's lurid panoply of saints and monsters in his mind's-eye incites a tingling in Gordon's bladder. He suddenly needs to pee. He reaches for the turquoise plastic pitcher on his bedside table, kept there expressly for that purpose. He's still attached to IV bottles, which makes it almost impossible for him to get up to use the bathroom. Gordon pushes his pajama bottoms to his knees and takes aim with his little dink.

Just as the first squirt successfully thrums against the pitcher's bottom, the door to his room swings open and Jeff, Gwen, Bethanny, Oscar and old Rosaria all parade into the room singing, "Happy Birthday." Wide Bethanny leads the way with a cake on a hospital gurney. Gordon is mortified, but there's no stopping what he's started.

Rosaria is the first to notice his predicament, getting an eyeful of his *special part* for perhaps the first time ever. "The boy, he unpantsed!" she says, with a kind of ancient Aztec indignation.

"He's pissin' like a racehorse, is what he's doin'," says Jeff. "Damn, buddy, you better slow down there, or you'll need another jug."

"Maybe we should come back another time," Gwen suggests. They all agree and turn around to head back the way they came.

"Don't worry, Gordon," Oscar says on his way out, "I seen worse."

"Happy Birthday!" trills Bethanny, leaving the cake behind.

Gordon swears he hears giggling once the door is closed. *It isn't right*, he thinks. *No six-year-old... no, wait... no SEVEN-year-old should have to suffer so much pain and ignominy.* There's only one thing to do. He props up his right arm and starts praying to whatever celestial beings are available, pleading for another swift end to his existence. He knows it's hopeless. God is having far too much fun with him.

Just call him the Whiz Kid. Everyone else did.

MATADOR

When Malcolm “Mal” Swannson gets back from Spain his first act, upon returning to his office, is to tack up a gaudy bullfighting poster on the fake wood paneled wall above his drafting table. In torrid hues of green and ochre, the poster announces the impending clash of wills between Manuel Alvarez and a particularly large and vicious bull named El Gordo Muerte—a confrontation to be held at 3:00 PM, Saturday, in La Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas del Espíritu Santo, Madrid. Mal had attended said bullfight and walked out of there stupendously impressed. He’s now thinking he might give up the hardware business—even give up his lucrative sideline as a certified Westinghouse air conditioning sales and service representative—so he can devote himself full-time to becoming a *torero*.

Those bloodthirsty Spaniards have probably never seen anything like him. Mal stands 6'7"—or 5'19", as he likes to joke—with only socks on his feet. He weighs a hefty 268 pounds. He has some kind of a weird skin disease, like psoriasis, that makes patches of his hide turn itchy and red and fall off in flakes, leaving behind white areas that make him look like he’s been haphazardly bleached. He’s practically albino in places. But what a matador he would make! Mal imagines his tall, skinny legs encased in tight, shiny toreador pants—*taleguilla*—the outline of his whopping manhood bulging at the crotch. Who has bigger balls: the bull or Mal Swannson? “Mal!” the audience roars in one voice, pelting him with rose petals before the contest has even begun. So what if he’s suffering from Early Male Pattern Baldness? (A combover makes it barely noticeable.) Who cares if his belly hangs way out over his belt these days? (Too much prime rib and homemade ice cream.) He’ll still be the best darn bullfighter Spain has ever seen.

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But Mal worries about his glasses—thick, black-framed numbers that make him look like Clark Kent. The world gets very blurry without them. He's near-sighted. What if the glasses happen to fall off during a tricky *verónica*, get crushed under the hoof of some picador's mount? Then where will he be?

Mal contemplates getting contact lenses.

It's excitement I've been missing, thinks Mal. He needs the thrill of danger; the quickening that comes with risk. Getting married to Cynthia really knocked the wind out of his sails. Right up until their honeymoon, he was *A Man of Action*. He tore around the countryside in a cherry red 1958 Corvette. He had a beautiful teak and mahogany eight-cylinder speedboat for towing water-skiers on the Kings River. He raced go-karts with his buddies just for kicks. A Homelite chainsaw engine on a welded steel frame could get a guy's butt moving at more than fifty miles an hour while he sat just inches above the ground. Man, that was fun! He won First Place in the Kings County Go-Kart Derby just a few weeks before Gordon was born.

When Gordon was born—that's when the fun really ended. Those people who swear babies are little bundles of joy? They're deluded. Babies cry almost non-stop and crap their pants relentlessly. Where's the fun in that? Gordon was a complete accident, the booby prize from a broken condom. Mal had never had much luck with condoms. He was just too big for them. They exploded into latex confetti during his ferocious orgasms. He even tried wearing two at a time, but Gordon somehow sneaked in there, anyway. Once that little sucker started mitosis, there was no getting away from him.

Cynthia delivered Gordon on June 1st, 1966—the same day as Marilyn Monroe's birthday. She would have been forty. *Marilyn Monroe and her near-mystical breasts, gone forever*. The thought still makes Mal sad. How many times has he jerked off to her image? A hundred times? Maybe more....

Mal has quite the porno collection, in which Marilyn features prominently. A whole cabinet inside his clothes closet is stacked with *Playboys* and *Penthouses*. He also has a hidden cache of more explicit fare, with titles like *Teen Slut Diaries* and *The Well-Hung Intruder*. Cynthia doesn't like it, but she isn't up for sex much these days, and a man has to have an outlet. She punishes him by buying designer stuff at the

mall. Every Diane Von Furstenberg wrap dress or Yves St. Laurent pantsuit is a big “*Fuck You!*” to Mal Swannson.

It’s an old story. He’s not the first guy to have a wife who takes out her aggression on him with a charge card. And it’s not that big a deal, anyway.... He can afford it. His dad, Milt, passed away from cancer about two years ago, leaving the business to him and his brother, Gerald—along with three-quarters of a million for each of them in stocks and bonds. Now all Mal has to do is look after his mother, and when she goes, man, he’ll be set. The old broad has an estate worth another cool million, at least.

He decides to check in with his mother on his way home from work. She lives only four doors down, in a ranch home that Mal designed and sub-contracted, just like his own place. She’s still mad at him for making her sell the house he grew up in: a rambling, three-story Arts and Crafts mansion under ninety-year-old maples on the prettiest street in town. But she’s getting old—she had Mal in her late-thirties—and the place was too much for her to keep up once Dad was gone. Besides, living there would have made her dwell on the past. Now she has all the modern conveniences and it’s easy for Mal to keep tabs on her.

He lets himself in through the back door with his own set of keys. Mal likes to sneak up on his mom and find out what she’s doing when she thinks she’s alone. Today he hears the wheeze and rhythmic gurgle of the old asthma machine she keeps in the pantry room. She must be having one of her spells. The asthma machine is an outdated piece of hospital equipment that Dad bought for her on the cheap. It’s used for vaporizing asthma medicine, so patients can inhale it into their clogged-up lungs, where they need it most. The whole thing consists of a long plastic tube, a little condenser unit, and a big green tank of pure oxygen. Mal worries that one of these days his mother will blow herself up. Especially ever since she decided that none of the asthma medications work, and took to pouring straight shots of Smirnoff’s vodka into the conveniently jigger-sized vaporizing cylinder.

“Ma? You home?” Mal shouts, just so he doesn’t scare her into a heart attack by walking in on her. *Although come to think of it....*

“In here!” Helen calls from the pantry, flamboyantly out of breath.

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Mal finds his bony old mother hunched over the asthma machine, wearing a dark brown turtleneck and tan polyester slacks—her usual get-up. Her hair is dyed jet black, just like it was in her illustration on the Sunny Maid Raisin boxes for all those years.

There's a funny story about the hair dye: One day his mother called him up in a tizzy, saying she'd had an accident and he'd better come over quick. When Mal got there, he found she'd knocked over the bottle of hair dye she'd been pouring over her head once a month in the kitchen sink for the last eight or nine years. It was some old brand they don't even make anymore—probably banned by the FDA. It turned out the stuff was so incredibly toxic that when it spilled it dissolved all the stain off the kitchen cabinet and ate a hole straight down through the linoleum floor. She ended up having the whole kitchen redone. Chalk it up to the price of vanity.

Mal can see the bumps of his mother's rib cage straining through the wool of her thin sweater. "You having trouble again?" he asks her. She turns to him, sucking on the asthma machine's clear plastic tube like Groucho on his last cigar.

"I'm always having trouble," she says. "I had you, didn't I?"

"I thought I was supposed to be the light of your life!" Mal pouts and puffs out his cheeks.

"You are, honey.... Now come here and sit down." His mother pats the top of a cardboard box full of Del Monte canned peaches just across from her. Mal sits. "Have you been to see Gordon?" she asks him.

Uh-oh. Now he's in for it. "No," Mal admits, staring at his size nineteen white leather oxfords. He's been looking for white wingtips, but so far no luck, outside of golf shoes.

"He's getting out tomorrow, you know...." His mother takes another huff off the tube, then asks, exhaling, "Have you seen him even once, in the whole two months he's been in there?"

"Oh, Ma... you know I don't like hospitals!"

"That's no excuse. He's your son. He needs you. When was the last time you gave him a hug?"

Mal hunches his broad shoulders.

"You don't know? Shame on you! I thought I raised you better."

"Christmas," Mal says, for lack of any concrete memory. "I think I hugged him at Christmas."

"Are you sure? Remember, I was there at Christmas. The only thing I saw you hugging was the toilet after you drank all that eggnog and helped yourself to three bowls of my green tapioca pudding."

He isn't usually a big drinker, but Mal always seems to go a little haywire around the holidays. *Touché, Mom*, Mal thinks. He turns petulant. "Y'know, sometimes I wonder if he's even mine. I mean, he's so skinny and weak. And look at me!" Mal points to his own barrel-sized chest. "How does a guy like me end up with a wheezy little runt like Gordon?"

Helen merely stares up at him from the depths of some private *samadhi*, toking on the asthma machine's tube like a Hindu at her hookah.

"Okay, so I guess, maybe, it's hereditary..." Mal says. "Sheesh, Ma, aren't you about done with that thing yet?" In irritation, Mal switches off the asthma machine's compressor. His mother suddenly sits up straight, as if awakened from a trance.

"That did it! Oh boy, I feel better now!" She breathes out a little singsong sigh of relief and slaps Mal on the knee. "How 'bout some banana bread?"

"No thanks. I just thought I'd pop in to see how you're doing. But I should be getting home. Cynthia's probably already got dinner made." Mal knows Cynthia has done no such thing. He does most of the cooking. If he didn't, they would have starved or succumbed to food poisoning years ago.

"Oh well then... *Toodle-loo!*" Helen waves him goodbye without standing up.

Mal notices his mom is doing the happy sigh thing again. The old biddy must be looped. He probably would be, too, if he'd just inhaled half a pint of 98-proof liquor. Mal kisses her goodbye and heads for the door.

When Mal gets home, he finds the house empty. Cynthia is probably over at the hospital with Gordon. Either that or she's running around town with her friend, Janice. Now *there's* someone he wouldn't mind seeing naked. Janice Marrsden is stacked like no woman

he's ever laid eyes on, outside of magazines. He's been thinking about putting a pool in the backyard, just so he can get a chance to see her in a bikini.

The truth is, Mal's getting a little bored with Cynthia. Her body has never been the same since she had Gordon. She used to be such a hot little number, but now her boobs are sagging, even though she agreed not to breastfeed. (Mal had read an article in *Penthouse*—or had it been *Juggs*?—that said not nursing was the way to keep tits perky and permanently one to two cup-sizes bigger.) She also has some post-pregnancy flab around her middle. She goes around looking like she's five months pregnant. It's embarrassing! Even worse, her belly button turned really big and ugly. Now every time she takes off her Playtex Control-Top Panties, it's like an old man's nose poking out at him. Mal swears that Cynthia let herself go on purpose, so he wouldn't pester her for sex. If that was the plan, then it's working. *Damn her eyes!* If she's going to act like that, what's the point of being married?

Mal inwardly laments the perfidy of women. Oh, what a heartless world he's been born into! Betrayed by his wife, by his weakling son, by his family in general. Cast adrift in a godless universe without a meaningful connection to anyone. He feels overwhelmed with sadness and an inescapable sense of doom. He's failing at everything, he thinks, and no matter how long he stays married, no matter how many children he ends up having, in the end, no one will truly understand him. Condemned to solitary confinement within his own sorry skin, he'll die alone.

There's nothing he can come up with to ease the numb horror of that final thought. Feeling a sudden queasiness, Mal staggers to the bathroom and locks himself in. Nursing his sense of cosmic alienation there among the cool blue tiles, Mal tells himself, *Get a grip! You can still enjoy life's simple pleasures.* And then he does what he knew he was going to do all along. He sits down on the john with the May 1972 issue of *Playboy* and beats off to the Barbi Benton spread.

He thought he might get off guilt-free this time, but it only makes him feel worse.



A few weeks after Gordon's return home from the hospital, Mal rolls out of bed early on a sunny Sunday morning and heads straight for the bathroom to read the letters section in the latest issue of *Penthouse*. The minutes fly by in a haze of *'I'm-a-sophomore-at-a-small-Midwestern-college I-swear-nothing-like-this-has-ever-happened-to-me-before you-wouldn't-believe-it I-met-this-gorgeous-hippie-girl-with-long-blonde-hair-perfect-breasts we-went-on-a-picnic I-guess-she-got-a-little-drunk nipples-showing-through-her-thin-cotton-panties-came-off-as-she-unzipped my-nine-inch-dingus-throbbing between-her-wet-lips I-was-in-heaven then-she-said-she-had-a-friend I-looked-in-the-rearview-mirror-and-saw-Spiro-T.-Agnew blowing-another-steamy-load-into-my-madly-humping-wife oh-god-I-moaned seeing-her-creamy-tits-stuffed-pussy oh-my-frickin'-god I'm-coming! Ohgodohgodohgod-I-can't-wait-for-it-to-happen-again.'* Mal is appalled by his own lack of self-control when he realizes he's whacking off at a time when most normal people would be getting ready for church. To make amends to whatever god or deceased relatives he might have offended, Mal decides to tackle the dismal, thankless chore of getting to know his only son again.

He finds Gordon sitting at the kitchen table wearing Jockey shorts and a dingy white T-shirt, contentedly munching away at the heroin of children's breakfast cereals, Kellogg's Super Sugar Smacks (*"Dig 'em!"* says the beatnik bear wearing a turtleneck on the front of the package). As usual, Gordon is so engrossed in a book that he's seemingly unaware of the spoon's repetitive journey from the cereal bowl to his mouth. Tiny puddles of milk are everywhere.

"Hey there, Gordy... what's that you're reading?" says Mal, playing the happy paterfamilias.

Gordon holds up the book so his father can read the cover. It's Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*. Not a book Mal happens to have read—or even heard of.

"*Steppenwolf*, huh? What's that about? A wolf?"

Gordon, still reading, says, "It's about a guy named Harry Haller, who wants to commit suicide with an overdose of opium. But then he gets invited to this weird club—for *Madmen Only*—instead."

"Really?" says Mal. Heck, it actually sounds kind of interesting. He wonders if any naked women show up at the club later. "How do you like it so far?" he asks.

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Gordon puts down the book and contemplates just how much he should reveal. For perhaps the first time in his life, his father actually seems interested in what he's going to say next. Gordon decides to confide in him: "Sometimes, I feel an awful lot like Harry."

"Don't do drugs, son. They're bad news," says Mal, missing the point entirely.

"I won't. But if I get invited to a club for Madmen Only, I'm going. Okay?"

Mal brightens. "Well, that'd probably be the Hoo-Hoo Club," he says, making a reference to a secret fraternity of lumber merchants that he's scheduled to be initiated into later that week, "but you can't go there until you're older. In the meantime, how about you and I go do some flying?"

Gordon jumps up from the table. "That'd be great! Cool! I'll go get dressed!"

Mal owns a red and white Cessna 172, the last significant toy leftover from his freewheeling days as a bachelor. He keeps it in a hangar at the Selma Airport. It's a cruddy little airport, bordered by a weedy, lily-pad-choked lake, but the rent is cheap and it's only eight miles away. Cynthia hates the airplane and wants Mal to get rid of it even more than she wanted him to get rid of the speedboat, the go-karts, and the Corvette—but Mal is sticking to his guns on this one. Taking away his ability to fly would be like taking away his freedom.

He and Gordon drive out to the airport in Mal's Ford Pinto, the "Lean, Green Machine" Cynthia made him buy after he sold the Corvette. Her justification was that it would be great on gas mileage. She also just loved the little hatchback—an automotive innovation that, in her opinion, was "too cute for words." Mal hates the rattletrap piece of crap. It has a four-speed transmission (every speed too slow) and the driver's seat is stuck at the back of its tracks and tilted at a crazy 45-degree angle, broken, because the car is just too damned small for him. To show his contempt, Mal keeps the backseat full of greasy tools, torn blueprints, and old milkshake cups from the Selma Dairy Queen. He also lets bird shit build up on the paint. The Pinto is only a few years old, but it already looks ready for the junk heap. Even Gordon is embarrassed to be seen in it.

There's no talk between father and son until they turn onto the dusty tar road that runs alongside the lake to the airport. Up ahead, a padlocked chain is strung between two red-painted concrete posts at the airport's gate. Gordon asks in advance if he can unlock it. Mal hands him the key. *Knock yourself out, kiddo*, Mal thinks to himself. When they pull up to the posts, Gordon scrambles out of the Pinto and drags the chain to the side of the road as quickly as possible, as if he's performing some manly, heroic task. Mal drives the Pinto into the airport proper and Gordon returns the chain to its original position with a fancy, one-handed click of the padlock, then jumps back in his seat. If Mal is supposed to be impressed, he doesn't show it. He merely holds out his hand, palm up, for the return of the key, as if even a word of praise or thanks might cheapen this little ritual of theirs, which has been playing out on summer weekends for almost as long as Gordon has been wearing pants.

They park alongside Mal's hangar—Number 5 in a row of eight—and get out to slide open the corrugated sheetmetal doors. They each take one. Again, Gordon strains at the task in a show-offy way, using only one hand. His door moves a few feet, then stalls. The steel track it rides on is corroded with rust. He tries using both hands, really leans into it, but the big door won't budge. *Save it, son*, Mal thinks. *You'll never be a he-man*. Mal goes over and pushes the door the rest of the way, trying to make it look easy, as if he wasn't really using the leverage from all of his 268 pounds.

Inside the hangar's grease-smelling shade, the Cessna stands on its three wheels like a proud, sharp-beaked bird. Mal kicks aside the tire blocks, opens the pilot's door, and pushes the airplane out into the sunlight. *Man, it's a thing of beauty....* The gleaming red nose cone looks dangerous, the silver prop lethal. The blank, Cyclopean eye of the windshield somehow speaks to him of soulless malice.

Mal loves everything about the plane: the macho complexity of its instrument panel, the new plastic smell of its ox-blood vinyl seats, the muted slosh of aviation fuel in its wing tanks. He runs through a quick pre-flight check before starting her up. The part Gordon likes best is when Mal opens a tiny spigot under the motor cowl and squirts a pinkish-hued stream of high-test fuel onto the tarmac. It looks like a dog pissing. Gordon used to ask why the plane did that and Mal

jokingly told him that even planes have to take a leak every now and then—but now Gordon knows better. It's to make sure there's no water in the fuel line. Everything checks out okay. Mal spits into the little puddle of gasoline he's created and the saliva skids along the surface like a bubble.

They both hop into the plane. Gordon sits in the co-pilot's seat, pretending he's steering. Mal starts the engine and they taxi toward the runway, waiting for clearance from the control tower. That's another thing Mal loves about flying: the private language everyone speaks over the radio, a language that makes no sense whatsoever if you're not a pilot. It's like belonging to a secret club.

The control tower tells him Runway Two is clear. Mal positions the plane and gets ready for take-off. He stands on the brakes and revs up the engine, checks the flaps, looks over his gauges. The noise inside the cabin is almost deafening. Then with a giddy rush of adrenaline, he lets the brakes go. He can feel the gravel skittering under the Cessna's tires as it picks up speed, the whole fuselage shaking with the sudden velocity. Mal concentrates on keeping them on a straight path between the landing lights, steering with the pedals at his feet. The prop bites into the air, chews up the sky, gnashes at gravity. They're hurtling toward the end of the runway like an ape with its ass on fire. Then there's a brief sensation of floating, a sudden lessening of tension as the engine's roar smoothes into a drone and the wheels sail clear of the ground. That first moment in the air is as good as it gets for Mal. All of his petty concerns leave him. His mind is clear. It's just him and the plane for that one split-second—

—then he looks over and sees Gordon smearing the Plexiglas co-pilot's window with the greasy tip of his nose.

“Hey, Gordon, cut that out!” yells Mal, but Gordon doesn't hear him. He's so wrapped up in watching the ground fall away—farmers' fields dwindling to patchwork quilts, the other airplanes on the tarmac turning into tiny toys—that he's oblivious to all sounds, even his father's shouting.

Once they've reached cruising altitude, Mal reaches over and taps Gordon on the knee, yelling right into his face: “Let's go buzz Kingsburg! Want to?” Gordon nods his head in the affirmative, bouncing up and down in his seat.

From 1,300-feet in the air, they follow the same country roads they drove in on, occasionally hitting thermal pockets that cause them to fall off invisible ledges, dropping two or three stories with a sudden smack and shudder. For Mal, piloting a single-engine plane is like driving a go-kart across the sky. It's a thrill, zooming along at about 120 miles an hour, not all that high above the treetops and telephone poles. It's nothing like flying in a jet, where there's a safe cushion of twenty thousand feet between you and the ground.

"Look for *Ze Swedish Teapot!*" Mal shouts like a Scandinavian lunatic.

The Swedish Teapot is the crowning achievement in a long history of civic mania designed to make Kingsburg famous as *The Swedish Village*. At some point during the Great Depression, desperate for tourism, the city council passed a resolution suggesting that all downtown buildings should have "a Swedish look" to commemorate the fact that 94% of the town's population had once consisted of Swedish immigrants. But no one could agree on what "a Swedish look" really meant until Mal's dad, a crafty Norwegian, sold City Hall a big load of discounted lumber. He told them to use it to tart up the storefronts with fake half-timbering and a bunch of brightly painted business signs in Old English script. **Svenske Gifte Shoppe. Andersen's Antoe Service. Leif's Olde Tyme Pizza Shack. Etcetera.** Later, another resolution passed, and the town started hosting an annual Swedish Festival. Big-titted high school cheerleaders in skimpy Swedish costumes danced around a Maypole. A Swedish Parade followed immediately thereafter. It featured the standard fez-wearing Shriners on go-karts, but there was also more idiosyncratic fare—like drunken, moose-antler-wearing Rotarians posing as Vikings, hurling candy at cowering children from the deck of a cardboard Norse ship. Word got around, and the tourists started showing up in droves. Soon orange, yellow, and blue plywood Dala horses were bolted to all the lampposts. Swedish polka music played from loudspeakers on every street corner along Draper Street—Kingsburg's main drag—from noon until dusk. Then, in a final masterstroke, the city council conceived of a glorious symbol to stand in perpetual recognition of the town's unique heritage. A crew was hired to scale the 300-foot-tall water tower in **Olatson Park** and transform it into a gigantic Swedish-style coffeepot, complete with spout and handle.

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"*It holds 1,500,000 cups of coffee!*" literature from the **Kingsburg Chamber of Commerce** proclaims. That same literature doesn't mention that everyone in town thinks it's really a teapot. Nor does it mention that The Swedish Teapot holds nothing but well water with potentially chromosome-damaging levels of pesticides and fertilizers from the enormous amount of agricultural work that goes on in the area. Kingsburg's second claim to fame, after all, is that it's *The Raisin Capital of the World*, the proud home of Sunny Maid Raisins. For a town to grow as many raisins as Kingsburg grows... well, it just doesn't come naturally.

"There it is! I see it!" Gordon shouts, pointing at the horizon, as the teapot tower and all the rest of Kingsburg springs into view.

It's illegal as hell, but Mal points the Cessna's nose down and swoops right along Draper Street at about 500 feet. The plane's noise is so loud that it drowns out the polka music. People come out of their stores to see what's going on. Mal catches a glimpse of roly-poly Mrs. Lundquist, opening the door to her **Swedish Sweets Shoppe** with the sign in the window that says: *Lutefisk Taffy Half-Price*. And there's that grouchy, bald-headed old fart, Henry Jacobsen, lurching out from under the awning of **Jacobsen's Pharmacie** wearing a starched white pharmacist's jacket and shaking his *El Cheapo* aluminum cane.

More people, too many to name, head out onto the sidewalks with their faces tilted upward and their mouths agape. Gordon imagines them all shouting, "Look! Up in the sky! There goes Mal Swannson and his boy, Gordon!" There's something incredibly satisfying about that kind of attention, and he's a little disappointed when Mal points them back up toward the clouds and says goodbye to Draper Street with a saucy wag of the Cessna's wings.

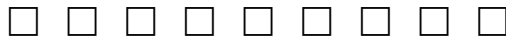
From a safer, FAA-sanctioned altitude, Mal tilts the plane in a slow, lazy circle so they can look down at the rooftops of their own neighborhood from the outskirts of town. "Do you see our house?" Mal asks. Gordon soon picks it out, and Jimmy's house, too, across an intersection and three rooftops up. He even thinks he can make out Jimmy in the middle of the street, riding his bicycle, although from that height it could be anyone. Gordon waves hello, but the little figure on the bike doesn't wave back.

The wind picks up on their way back to the airport. Just as Mal is making his final approach—flaps at 20-degrees, the air speed indicator

bawling a warning like a mechanical baby—a strong crosswind gusts in and tosses the Cessna sideways off the airstrip. They slam down in the dirt between the landing lights at ninety miles an hour and bounce toward the lake. For one terrible moment it looks like they’re heading straight into the drink. But Mal gooses the prop and gets them airborne again, right out over the lily pads. A maneuver like that is called a “Touch-And-Go”—and it was a bad one. Mal hopes the guys up in the control tower didn’t see it, but they probably did. He flies around the airport again, feeling a little shaky, and lines up for another approach. He takes the crosswind into consideration this time and touches down with hardly a bump. He taxies back to the hangar, puts the plane away as fast as he can, and gets the hell out of there. Driving the Pinto has never felt better.

Although Mal doesn’t notice, Gordon tries to suppress the knowledge that they both almost met a watery death in the same algae-green lake where he used to chase frogs and capture tadpoles in Folgers’ coffee cans. In fact, Gordon doesn’t betray even so much as a glimmer of anxiety until they get home, when he scampers into the bathroom just off the garage and barfs up a bellyful of partially-digested Super Sugar Smacks. Before he can finish, his mother click-clacks over on her high heels to stand above him, asking, “What’s the matter? Did your father feed you too much candy?”

“Motion sickness,” Mal explains—and leaves it at that.



The day Mal is initiated into the Hoo-Hoo Club starts out like any other. At 7:30 in the morning, he unlocks the hardware store’s front doors and turns off the alarm. As President and CEO of **Swannson Lumber, Inc.**, Mal could assign that task to someone else and sleep in, but he likes doing it. Unlocking the doors always makes him feel like the king of his domain. He’s greeted by the familiar smells of sawdust, greasy bolts, jute twine (macramé is getting to be a big fad), oily dust in the racks of galvanized plumbing supplies, the stench of new plastic steaming off green vinyl garden hoses, the baked electronics of unpacked Black-and-Decker power drills. Virile smells. Masculine

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smells. *If someone could put those smells in a bottle of aftershave, Mal thinks, they'd have a big winner.*

He turns on the coffeepot and dumps two cups of Folgers into the filter. The lumberyard crew will be in soon, and they'll want to stand around drinking coffee and telling jokes for a good twenty minutes before they start their day. The yard crew consists of three minimum-wage Mexicans—Paco, Leo, and Ruben—and their foreman, Johnny Hoss, the self-proclaimed “World’s Strongest Okie.” Even though Mal stands almost a full head taller, there’s something about Johnny Hoss that intimidates him. There are stories floating around about Johnny. How he lied about his age to get into boot camp, shipping out of Oklahoma to Vietnam just before his sixteenth birthday. How he specialized in night operations behind enemy lines once he got there, trained to decapitate his foes with a length of piano wire. How he killed a hundred men that way, maybe more. Mal once saw Johnny demonstrate his piano wire technique on a four-by-four post, snapping it neatly in two. He also saw Johnny fill the back of a pickup truck with 94-pound sacks of concrete mix, tossing them from a platform a good twelve feet away as if they weighed no more than goosedown pillows. The man could pick up an armload of 20-foot Douglas fir beams and walk them across the yard without even breaking a sweat. His perpetually sunburned neck was bigger than his square, crewcut head. His belly looked like he spent every afternoon drinking gallons of beer, but it was all pure muscle. The only things even slightly soft about Johnny Hoss were his eyes, which were large and brown, with extravagant lashes. They were movie star eyes, really. They made him just too damn good-looking.

“Hey, Boss. Today’s the big day, huh?”

It’s Mike Shriver, Mal’s Number One air conditioning man, sneaking up on him, snapping him out of his thoughts about Johnny.

“Yep, tonight’s the night,” says Mal. “Today we’re men, but tomorrow we’re Hoo-Hoos.”

Mal has invited Mike—and Johnny Hoss—to be initiated into the Hoo-Hoo Club with him. He didn’t want to do it alone. Besides, the club’s numbers have been dwindling in recent years and it will make Mal look good, bringing in some fresh blood.

He and Mike head back to Mal's office to look over their schedule. Mike perches himself on Mal's drafting stool, looking like a big, friendly vulture in an oversized navy blue mechanic's jumpsuit with his name stitched in red across the left breast pocket. He has a narrow, pockmarked jaw and a snaggle-toothed overbite that causes his lips to stick out beyond the tip of his nose. His close-set, watery yellow eyes usually convey one of two expressions—bewilderment or suspicion—from under the grease-stained brim of the Benjamin Moore Paint cap he always has on. Not even his mother would ever make the mistake of calling him handsome, but he's one hell of a Westinghouse Certified Air Conditioning Technician. Mike brings in more money for Mal than any other single employee. In a way, Mal loves him like a son. Better than a son, actually, compared to his feelings about Gordon.

Mike says, "I stayed late last night and finished hooking up ol' Mrs. Emmersen's unit. Man, oh man, when I turned that baby on, I thought snow was gonna come out of the vents."

"Yeah, we sold her way too many BTUs," Mal admits. "But she's rich now that Bob cashed it in. She can afford it."

"I just hope she doesn't leave it on all day and then come home to find her cats frozen stiff." Mike lets out a self-congratulatory chuckle at the end of that little joke.

Mal just looks at him and says, "She has too many dang cats, anyway."

Gerald, Mal's younger brother, stoops and pokes his head in through the doorway to say good morning to them on his way to the back office. Gerald is Vice President of the company and handles all the books. He's even taller than Mal—at 6'-9"—but he has a sissy's way about him. He majored in accounting at Reedley Community College. He spends his days reading obituaries and bankruptcy notices and trying to collect accounts receivable. Mal gets all the glamour jobs: drawing up architectural projects, formulating plans of attack with Mike and the rest of the A.C. boys, telling the lumberyard crew what to do. But without Gerald, he knows he'd be in trouble.

That doesn't stop Mal from hating him. In fact, he despises him so much that he didn't invite Gerald to tag along with them to become a Hoo-Hoo. But it's not like Gerald would ever do such a thing in the first place.

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Ignoring Gerald's greeting, Mal says to Mike, "The coffee should be ready now. Wanna go get a cup?"

"Cuppa Joe? Yeah, sure. I could use an eye-opener..." says Mike, who usually shies away from caffeine. "Mrs. Emmersen made me stay late and eat cookies with her. Fresh baked chocolate chips. But jeez, the old broad just about talked my ear off. She was going on and on about pillbugs crawling out of her bathtub and doorknobs falling off and the barking noises her refrigerator kept making. I think she wanted me to fix everything. I tried pretending I was interested, but really, I just couldn't give two shits. She made me feel so tired I could barely walk out of there. Finally, I had to tell her I don't know jack about pillbugs or barking refrigerators. I told her she should call a dang plumber."

Mike keeps talking—past the key cutter with its revolving rack of shiny key blanks, past the white pegboard walls hung with shovels, rakes, push brooms, and handsaws—until they reach the coffee counter, where Paco, Leo, Ruben, and Johnny Hoss have already gathered. Johnny is explaining to his amused audience how he obtained his college degree:

"Y'all might think I'm just a dumb Okie—and it's true, I dropped outta school in the third grade—but I bet y'all didn't know I got me a college diploma. Not many third grade dropouts that can say that, huh? Paco, you got a diploma? Ruben?" Johnny Hoss bats his movie star eyes at them in mock concern.

"They don't give out no diplomas in juvie, man..." says Ruben.

"Well, they don't give out no diplomas in the Marines, neither, no matter how many gooks ya kill. But once I got out, I figured it was time I got me some education. They have this thing where the government pays you to go back to school. So I ended up takin' me a six-week course in animal husbandry. By the time I was done I got me a diploma, which says, basically, that I'm qualified to jack-off roosters."

Paco, Leo, and Ruben burst out laughing. Johnny Hoss laughs right along with them, but he's not finished: "That diploma got me a job at the Albion Poultry factory. A good job, too. Paid nineteen dollars an hour. Full benefits. And all I had to do was jack-off them roosters. Lemme tell ya, they was horny little suckers. They was just beggin' for it. I'd grab 'em by the ankles and turn 'em upside down,

then I'd get my thumb way down in there and start rubbin' it around, just like they showed us in class. Them roosters would start gettin' into it. They'd ruffle up their damn feathers. They'd start cluckin' and flappin' and carryin' on—wigglin' their little asses like all get out. Then *Bingo!*—*tsst, tsst, tsst!*—they'd shoot their wads halfway across the room if you didn't catch it in a cup the way you was supposed to. You wouldn't believe all the jizz them roosters had in 'em. And they'd do it five, maybe six times a day. It was just my first job outta college, but it was a good 'un. I kept it for more'n a year."

"If it was such a great job, then why'd you quit, *pendejo*?" Paco asks.

"My thumbs was gettin' sore."

Johnny holds out a well-callused thumb and uses it to do something vaguely obscene to the sparse black mustache under Paco's affronted nostrils. "*¡Cabron!*" Paco complains, lurching to get away. Then Johnny eyes Mal—while Leo and Ruben laugh—and says, "C'mon, guys, let's get to work." As they all head outside, Johnny turns and yells, "See ya, Gordon!"

"Bye!" says Gordon appearing from behind the coffee counter, which is taller than he is. He's carrying a small wastepaper basket loaded with crumpled Styrofoam cups and coffee grounds.

"Gordon! What are you doing back there?" asks Mal.

"It's Saturday," says Gordon. "I'm supposed to be here. It's my job, remember?"

"I thought your mom wasn't bringing you in until later."

"I always get here this early."

"Were you back there this whole time?"

"I'm supposed to empty the trash first thing," Gordon says. He doesn't want to mention the fact that every Saturday Johnny Hoss sneaks him his own special cup of coffee—with lots of non-dairy creamer and sugar. "*It'll stunt your growth,*" Johnny says, "*but with your daddy as tall as he is, you'd be better off a little stunted.*" As a diversionary tactic, Gordon asks his father to explain to him what *jizz* means.

"Oh, crap," says Mal. "It's, um, the stuff roosters shoot out of their wieners so they can have babies."

"Roosters can have babies?"

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Gordon pretends to be so staggered by this information that the wastepaper basket tilts in his hands, dumping a few coffee grounds onto the laces of his blue suede Puma tennis shoes.

"No, but hens lay eggs, and... damnit, Gordon, go empty that trash before you spill it all over the carpet."

Gordon takes off, leaving Mike and Mal alone. Somewhere behind them, a sales clerk rings one of the registers, making the day's first sale (a pair of butter yellow work gloves and a Hula Hoe). "You believe any of that rooster business?" Mike asks.

"Who knows what to believe," Mal says darkly, "when it comes to Johnny Hoss."

The rest of the morning goes by in a blur—as they all do—with Mal answering phone calls, reading the mail, talking to customers, shuffling papers, dispensing advice, and lending a hand wherever a hand seems to be needed. Around noon, he mans the cash register while the clerks head out to lunch. A sunburnt old contractor, Hank Rasmussen, swaggers in demanding to buy 100 two-by-four studs, but he wants to go out back and personally handpick them. "Sure... go ahead. The customer is always king around here," says Mal, as he charges Hank for Select grade lumber—instead of the stud price—without telling him. A little while later, two bandanna-wearing Mexican delinquents hit the counter—known paint-huffers. They start babbling at him in Spanish. Mal takes them around to the Paint Supplies section and opens the theft-proof Plexiglas case he recently installed to protect the spray cans of Rustoleum. He hands the boys two cans each of Metallic Copper, even though they're pointing and waving their hands at everything, like a drunken, four-armed octopus. Mal knows what's best for them. If they're paying just to inhale the stuff from inside a gym sock, they might as well be discreet about it. Copper is the closest match to their skin color. Besides, metallic paint gets you higher—everybody knows that.

Mal spends the rest of the afternoon cooped-up in his office drawing plans for a swimming pool in his backyard. He and Gerald inherited a cabin in Morro Bay from their father, which they're thinking about selling. If it happens, Mal will use his share of the proceeds to put in the pool (kidney-shaped, with a Jacuzzi, is what he's thinking—while visions of Janice Marrsden in a bikini keep crowding

his thoughts, making him half-delirious). Gordon and Cynthia won't think it's a fair trade—they both love the cabin—but they'll just have to put up with it. Gerald says they can make a pile of money on the deal, and business is business.

The next thing Mal knows, it's time to drive to Fresno for the Hoo-Hoo Club meeting. He and Mike and Johnny make the thirty-minute trip in Cynthia's avocado green Cadillac Eldorado. Mal left Cynthia with the Pinto. He wants to show his guys a good time, and the Caddy has air-conditioning and a Quadraphonic sound system. He plays them his tape of Roger Whittaker, Mal singing along to the lyrics of "I Don't Believe in 'If' Anymore" in his froggy baritone—which no one seems to appreciate. Johnny asks him if he has any Lynyrd Skynyrd and Mike wants to hear Deep Purple, but neither request can be granted. The only other tape in the car is *The Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass Christmas Album*. Rather than torture themselves with that, they switch to an AM station and listen to Bill Cullen interviewing Joe Garagiola for NBC Radio.

The Hoo-Hoo Club has rented out the Copacabana Room in the Ramada Inn just off Blackstone Avenue for the big shindig. Mal can tell Mike and Johnny are impressed. As he leads them through the palm tree flanked double doors, someone tries to hand Mal a brochure. He doesn't even bother to look at it. He already knows the literature. Founded in 1892, the Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo claims to be the oldest industrial fraternal organization in America. Their mystic symbol—to be found on the sides of lumberyards and timber companies everywhere—is an arched black cat against an orange background with its tail curled into the number 9. The club's membership is strictly limited to lumber merchants and their employees, but as Mal surveys the red-carpeted room he sees nothing to distinguish the people there from any other cheap-suited mob of businessmen—except, perhaps, for a preponderance of gold-rimmed aviator-style bifocals and some extravagant Martin Van Buren-style muttonchops. But even those seemingly flagrant fashion choices can't define them as a group. The same look can be found these days on regional bank managers, State Farm insurance agents, Methodist Sunday school teachers, "Broadway Joe" Namath, and John Lennon. It's 1973, after all....

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A stacked waitress with a ponytail and pimply skin shows them to a table near the center of the room. Mike and Johnny take seats, looking a little lost among all the lumber bigwigs. Mal sees Arnie Andersen standing nearby and invites him over. Arnie owns Citizen's Lumber, up in Modesto. He's a ruthless son-of-a-gun who once sued Georgia-Pacific when they were late with a big plywood shipment. Or maybe he just sued the truck driver—Mal doesn't really remember. All he knows for sure is that Arnie Andersen is always suing the pants off someone.

"Arnie! How's business?"

"Business stinks, Mal!" Arnie says with a jovial shrug. "I just bankrupted some bearded jackass who thought he could build himself a hippie-dippy VW repair shop without paying me for my lumber first. Now I own the damn place, but what the hell am I supposed to do with it? You got any Volkswagens that need fixin'?"

"My Caddy could use a lube job."

"Hell's bells. I don't know diddly about cars—especially Kraut ones. You'd think I might've learned something about 'em while I was shuffling Nazis around in the CIC, but *no*. And the longhaired crumbums who drive those things nowadays don't have any money, anyway.... How's business up in your neck of the woods?" They start walking away from the table.

"Could be better. We'll see how the raisin crop does this year."

A waitress comes by and hands them drinks. Big drinks the color of Ty-D-Bol liquid toilet bowl cleanser, with little green mermaid swizzle sticks. Not something Mal was expecting.

"Cheers!" says Arnie.

They clink their glasses together and take big gulps. Mal tastes molasses-flavored gasoline. "What the heck is this stuff?" he asks with a horrified pucker.

"It's an old Hoo-Hoo tradition," says Arnie. "Secret recipe. Hope you like it, 'cause you'll be drinking a lot of this stuff tonight. It's part of the ritual."

Mike and Johnny are also in possession of the weird blue cocktails. They raise their glasses to Mal in a toast and shout out something obscene, which doesn't quite carry across the noisy, crowded room. "What did they say?" Mal asks Arnie.

“‘To the Imperious Blue Thunderfuck.’ It’s the name of the drink.”

“Huh...” says Mal. He takes another huge gulp. He figures he might as well choke the stuff down. It’s bound to make the evening more interesting.

About twenty minutes later, Wayne Covington—President of Covington Lumber and Hardware in Visalia—gets up on a little stage behind a podium and asks everyone to sit down. He says they’re all in for a huge treat tonight because the Chief Executive Officer of Hoo-Hoo International—the Snark of the Universe—has flown in all the way from Alabama just to be with them.

“What the heck’s a Snark of the Universe?” asks Johnny Hoss.

Good question, thinks Mal. It takes a minute for his brain to engage (that drink is getting right on top of him, whatever it is...) but then Mal is able to explain that the Hoo-Hoo Club’s officers are named after creatures in a poem by Lewis Carroll—the guy who wrote *Alice in Wonderland*.

“‘Jabberwocky,’” Arnie adds helpfully.

“*Whassat*—some kinda secret code?” Johnny sounds belligerent.

“It’s the name of the poem,” says Mal. “It’s a weird poem, really. It doesn’t make a whole heck of a lot of sense. There’s stuff in there about talking oysters and other things with crazy names like... well, I don’t remember the names right now. Arnie? How ‘bout you?”

“*Boojums*. I remember it has *Boojums* in it. I think those are the things you find in the bottom of your red flannel pajamas after a really bad nightmare.”

“No, those would be *dingleberries*,” Mike Shriver pronounces.

At that point, Wayne Covington helps them out with some of the terms by inviting The Supreme Nine to join him up at the podium, calling each of the Hoo-Hoo Club officers by their name and title: “Steve Emerson, *Arcanoper*; Jeff Bankston, *Boojum*; Lee Hendricksen, *Gurdon*; Fred Erickson, *Scrivenoter*...”

“Damn! I feel like doin’ the hula!” Johnny Hoss says, apropos of nothing. “What’s in these drinks?”

“I can’t believe it!” Mike chimes in. “It’s only my second one and I’m already bombed out of my skull.”

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Mal himself is feeling no pain. “Pussies,” he says, trying to keep a straight face.

They all watch as the Snark of the Universe hobbles up to the podium—a white-haired old gentleman decked out in orange suspenders and a string tie under a wrinkled cream-colored suit. He looks like a Kentucky horse breeder gone to seed, or maybe Father Time on a bender. Wayne proposes a toast, all gobbledygook and smarmy good feelings. *Down the hatch*, thinks Mal. A waitress is there with another Imperious Blue Thunderfuck for him before he sets down the empty glass. *I’d like to Imperiously Thunderfuck her*, Mal thinks, even though she’s not all that good-looking—blubbery arms, greasy brown perm, a voice like a pelican. Doesn’t matter. Alcohol-fueled perversity is coursing through his veins. He has a partial boner going “*Hubba hubba....*”

“Greetings, fellow Hoo-Hoos,” says the Snark of the Universe in a high-pitched, quavering voice. “Can you all hear me out there? Great. Let me start off by telling y’all that I come tonight bearing prophecies from the Seer of the House of Ancients....”

This guy sounds like somebody’s grandma riding a dildo, thinks Mal, somewhat uncharitably. *And the Seer of the House of Ancients is probably some senile old fart who runs a True Value store down in Mississippi.*

“The Seer tells me grand things are in store for the Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo in the coming year. Yes, very grand things. So be on your toes!”

This exhortation rouses the room to drunken cheers. Apparently those Imperious Blue Thunderfucks are having an effect beyond Mal’s immediate vicinity. “Show us your tits!” someone shouts. It’s unclear whether this request is directed at one of the waitresses or the Snark of the Universe. The latter nervously fingers a button on his shirt.

“Tonight, as you know,” the Snark bravely continues, “we’re initiating nine new members into the Fresno County Sub-Order of Hoo-Hoos. This is a very fine thing you young men are doing. You’ll be on the receiving-end of venerable mystic secrets that must never leave these premises. In fact, y’all must swear to never speak of anything that transpires between these four walls of the Ramada Inn’s very elegant Copacabana Room. Swear it upon the Slithy Tove, who will come to your house in the dead of night and stick its hollow, anteater-like tongue down your throat and suck out all your vital

organs if you should so much as breathe of these forthcoming events. Swear it now, gentlemen.”

Mal swears to whatever-it-is, along with the rest of them.

“Excellent. I can tell you really mean it. The Slithy Tove is well-satisfied. We may now distribute the Sacred Jabberwocks. Assume your positions, men.”

The older members of the Hoo-Hoo Club form two straight lines of twenty-seven men each down the center aisle of the room. The waitresses enter from the sides with drink trays piled high with rubber crocodiles—or something like that. Vulcanized iguanas might also be a safe bet. Each man in line takes one of the spiky, flexible creatures from a tray and grasps it by the tail. Some of them experimentally swish the things through the air, like batters during a warm-up pitch.

“I don’t like the looks of this...” says Johnny Hoss.

“Oh crap,” says Mike.

“Initiates,” says the Snark of the Universe with enough sibillance to create a burst of feedback from his microphone, “it’s time to strip down to your undershorts.”

So they strip, knowing what’s in store for them. Mike is the first to run the gauntlet. The sound of all those rubber lizards hitting him is really something, almost deafening. Mike takes it like a gangly toddler—crying and drooling by the end of it, his Hanes athletic briefs bunched up in the crack of his red-smacked ass like a loose diaper. The other initiates follow him.

Some joker starts playing Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of A Thin Man” over the P.A. system. When Dylan sneers out the famous chorus line—“...*something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?*”—Mal, standing there in his Fruit-of-the-Looms, realizes with a shudder that in this case he’s Mister Jones. Maybe he’s always been Mister Jones. He hears something about having *contacts among the lumberjacks to get the facts when someone attacks your imagination*. He wonders: *Is that doped-up folksinger reading my frickin’ mind?*

With a head full of Imperious Blue Thunderfucks, Mal finds himself suddenly open to the occult vitality of Bob Dylan’s lyrics. He wonders if there’s any way to shed his Mister Jonesness. He wants to get with it. Become a hep-cat. He wants to—*how do they say it?*—“Turn

on, tune in, and drop out.” Mal imagines himself smoking a fat cigar of marijuana in Haight-Ashbury, then balling some dirty little hippie chick on a beanbag chair in her patchouli-smelling Victorian attic. After his orgasm, she puts on a tie-dyed negligée and plays the harpsichord for him. Then he goes downstairs and finds the Black Panthers sitting around the kitchen table, making a bomb to blow up a bank or the home improvement section at Sears. He gives them some skin. They slap him high-fives. Mal says, “Who’s the man?” And the Black Panthers say, “You da man, Mal. You, babes. You is one funky-ass muthafucka....”

This tender reverie comes to an abrupt and intimidating end when someone gives Mal a shove. He staggers into the gauntlet and suffers a hail of blows from fifty-four flailing mini-dragons. He finds it oddly comforting, although he knows he’ll be showing some welts later. At least it sobers him up some—maybe too much. He suddenly feels like horking. It’s the smell of all that rubber. It’s expanding up his nostrils, assaulting his sinuses with the too-powerful stench of bicycle tires and new shower curtains. Eyes watering, saliva glands working overtime, Mal grabs Arnie Andersen by the lapels and croaks like a sea lion right into his face.

Oh, it’s only the dry heaves, thinks Mal. Nothing’s coming up. The other guys stop whacking him, anyway. No one wants to risk getting puked on.

“Holy cats! You okay there, Mal?” Arnie asks him. Just friendly concern—one guy to another.

“Sure, *yep*,” Mal says through a belch.

Then with a backwoods holler, Johnny Hoss leaps naked onto a group of Mal’s iguana-wielding tormentors. He sends them scattering like bowling pins. It looks like the start of a free-for-all—some wild-assed melee—but then Johnny hops back up on his feet and just stands there grinning, pleased with himself in the same way that a big dog seems pleased when roughhousing with a bunch of pups.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen...” the tremulous voice of the Snark of the Universe admonishes them from the podium. “Let’s all restrain ourselves for a moment. It’s time for the second phase of our hallowed initiation rite. Blindfolds, please!”

MATADOR

Mal, Mike, and Johnny all submit to being blindfolded, along with the other six initiates. Deprived of his sight, Mal feels dizzy, on the verge of passing out. He's led into a small, warm room where he smells candles burning and hears voices echoing off the walls. He's told to kneel. Some kind of chanting is taking place. To Mal's ears, it sounds like a Catholic mass, but instead of Latin, the words all seem to be made-up by Lewis Carroll. Then the Snark of the Universe's amplified voice rings out, reciting some mystical nonsense, a singsong incantation. Someone forces Mal to drink more of the Imperious Blue Thunderfuck—spiced this time with nutmeg and cinnamon. Then he's told to stick out his tongue. Cold fingers pinch it and a slimy, hairy thing about the size of a slug is put into Mal's mouth. He's forced to swallow. Nearly gags. One last singsong magic spell follows, along with another jolt of Old Thunderfuck to wash the slimy thing down. Mal hears someone retching. He gets a whiff of the tomatoey tang of fresh vomit. Things are definitely getting weird.

The chanting stops. Mal hears people leaving the room. He wonders if he can take his blindfold off now. As if in answer, the Snark of the Universe says, "Our initiation ceremony is almost complete. Just ten more minutes and you'll all be welcomed into the Vasty Eternal Brotherhood of Hoo-Hoos. But for these next ten minutes, you must leave your blindfolds on at all times, no matter what."

It's then that Mal gets hit with the first headbutt.

Somebody in there is acting like a bull gone mad, making grunting noises and running around the room with his head down, ramming into people. That first blow to his solar plexus knocks the wind out of Mal and he falls on his side with a thud. He hears the man-beast tackle someone else. There's a yelp of pain and the dull collapse of yet another man hitting the floor. Mal thinks the unseen marauder must be Johnny Hoss, drunk out of his mind, making quarterback sacks in pure darkness, just for the hell of it. As Mal gets his lungs back he tries to concentrate. He climbs to his feet with his back against a wall, sending out feelers so he'll be able to sense where Johnny strikes next.

"What the hell's going on here?" someone demands to know.

"Holy jeez! I'm ripped to the tits!" Mike Shriver shouts.

A few more bodies go down with various yips and grunts. Then Mal is hit again. This time he takes a headbutt to the stones, but by

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anticipating it, he's able to partially deflect the blow. He's also drunk enough that the sensation is dulled, so he doesn't fold. *Now's the time to take action*, he thinks. *What would Joe Garagiola do? No... wait!* In a flash of inspiration, Mal recalls the words of the great Juan Belmonte: "*In order to fight, one must forget the body.*" Belmonte learned to bullfight nude, under moonlight. Mal suddenly knows what must be done. He steps out of his enormous white underpants and dangles them at his side like a matador's cape.

"*Toro! Toro!*" he shouts at his invisible assailant. *C'mon, Johnny*, Mal thinks. *Come to Daddy.*

A black force ripples the air in front of Mal like a malevolent wind. Now is the time to become the *torero*, to calmly meet the Minotaur on its own turf. "*Toro!*" Mal taunts again, dancing, feinting, a maestro in death's arena. Who has bigger balls: the bull or Mal Swannson? "Mal!" the audience roars as one.

Then he's sideswiped. Hamstrung. Mal can't believe his bad luck. He crumples as frantic, sweaty arms grapple with his midsection. He strikes out blindly and listens for a voice, some identifying syllable, but all he hears is heavy breathing. Then there's a moment of true horror as Mal realizes it's no longer just fun and games. A howl of pain escapes him and he urinates like a toad as his inner thigh feels the pressure of someone's savage, clamping teeth.

At least he missed my 'nads, Mal thinks as the lights switch back on and he hears men shouting. He passes out as soon as it seems safe.

THE FALL

From a seven-year-old's perspective, Gordon's father looks like the big man in the frozen vegetable commercials—the Jolly Green Giant. Except he usually isn't green. For the most part, he's blotchy white and pink—and kind of hairy. Nevertheless, Gordon sees himself, metaphorically, as that gullible commodities trader, Jack, and his father as the owner of a castle at the top of a very tall beanstalk. So it's as a fallen giant that Gordon perceives his father, when late one night he hears an anguished moaning and follows the sound into his parents' bedroom, where he finds Mal sprawled across the king-sized waterbed wearing nothing but a grimace and the tattered, bloodied remains of his Fruit-of-the-Loom underpants.

"Gordon, you're not supposed to be in here," his mother says, rushing toward him. Just behind her, Gordon can see Doctor Brockett leaning over the bed to dress a gaping wound on Mal's leg.

"What happened?" Gordon asks. He hears Doctor Brockett chuckling.

"Daddy had an accident," his mother says, taking a long drag off a mentholated Marlboro. "A man bit him."

This is terrible news to Gordon's ears. Grown men aren't supposed to bite each other. Sure, he and Jimmy do it sometimes, but that's different. Little boys bite (and throw rocks). Men are supposed to use guns (and knives and grenades and missile-launching Aston-Martins)—just like they show on TV.

Maybe, Gordon reasons, it's a good thing my dad only got bit, after all....

"Who did it?" he wants to know. Gordon furrows his little brow as if he intends to disembowel the perpetrator.

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"No one's sure," his mother tells him. "It happened at the Hoo-Hoo Club. In the dark. Now off to bed. Scoot."

"Can't I tell him goodnight first?"

"Okay. But then I want you to go to sleep and just forget about all this. It's way past your bedtime."

Gordon approaches the waterbed and puts his hand on his father's gargantuan, splotchy shoulder. His father won't look at him. "*Boojums*," he mutters, shielding his eyes from the light. His breath smells strongly of Imperious Blue Thunderfucks, which makes Gordon think his father has been gargling with aftershave.

"Hi there, Gordon," Doctor Brockett says.

"Hi, Doctor Brockett."

"Your father probably isn't up for much talking right now. He's just had a big dose of medicine. But I'll bet you'd like to see the wound, wouldn't you?"

Gordon is amazed at how easily Doctor Brockett can read his mind. He only nods his head in the affirmative, afraid that if his mother hears him say "Yes" she might come and whisk him off to bed.

Carefully, Doctor Brockett peels back the bandages and gauze on Mal's thigh. "It's kind of ugly, but you can take it, right?"

Gordon nods again. He involuntarily shudders when he sees the bloody tooth imprints on his father's leg surrounded by a watery brown-flecked stain that looks like Worcestershire sauce. "Gross!" he whispers in astonishment. The imprints aren't perfectly round, like the bite marks he and Jimmy gave each other last month at the end of a particularly ferocious water balloon fight. Instead, the top bite mark's semi-circle is broken in the middle, with two deep gouges jutting out in a very distinctive way. Gordon knows only one person who has front teeth like that: Mike Shriver. But he decides to keep that information to himself—at least for the time being.

"Thanks, Doctor Brockett," Gordon says, remembering his manners. Then he quietly adds: "Goodnight, Dad." He can tell that his father doesn't hear him.

"*Toro...*" whispers Mal, grabbing at his crotch.

THE FALL

“*Vaya con Dios...*” Gordon whispers back, in solidarity, as his mother cups her hand at the back of his thoughtful blonde head and leads him away.



The next morning, Gordon gets up—sleepy-eyed, tousle-haired—and shambles along the hallway toward his morning bowl of Super Sugar Smacks. The dusty sunlight tumbling in through the sliding glass doors ahead of him seems polluted somehow, as if the air it travels through is coated with a thin layer of grease. Then Gordon realizes it’s a *smell* making him think that, the smell of cigarette smoke in stale, sweaty clothes mixed up with old beer and something stronger, maybe rum or gin. He finds Johnny Hoss and Mike Shriver laid out like the dead on the brown Danish Modern couches in the living room. Mike is on his back, snoring, with his mouth hanging open like a lascivious trout. Johnny, on his side, opens his eyes as Gordon tiptoes closer.

“Heya, Gordon.”

“Hi, Johnny,” whispers Gordon, not wanting to wake Mike. “How come you guys are here?”

“Well, it was kind of a wild night. Your daddy was showin’ us a good time.”

“He got bit.”

“I know.”

“You know who did it?”

They both look over at the other couch.

“I think so, too,” whispers Gordon. “But how come?”

“Dunno, really. I was blindfolded. And drunk as a skunk. They was doin’ some sorta initiation rite. Towards the end there, they made us eat somethin’ like a big ol’ wad of snot, only hairy. Damn near made me puke. Things started gettin’ kinda hazy after that.”

“Is that when he got bit?”

“Somewhere in there, yeah. But it was dark. Your Daddy was yellin’ somethin’ fierce, but by the time they got the lights on, there was no tellin’ who done it. But I could make me a good guess.” Johnny

nods his head and gives another meaningful glance at the still-snoring Mike Shriver.

“Wouldn’t there be blood on his teeth?” queries Sherlock Gordon, Master of Deduction.

“Not really. He coulda licked hisself clean.”

“Like a cat.”

“Damn straight. You know that sign they use, the black cat with its ass all up in the air? Kinda creepy, innit? There’s some weird shit goin’ on with them Hoo-Hoos. Like, you ever heard of the Snark of the Universe?”

“No. What’s that?”

“I’m not sure, but I met the dude last night. Guess he’s some kinda wizard. He said a whole lotta mumbo-jumbo. Buncha black magic, hoodoo bullshit. At least they didn’t sacrifice no goats, but damn, it was weird. You stay away from them Hoo-Hoos, Gordon. Somethin’ just ain’t right with them sons-a-bitches.”

Gordon’s mother shuffles into the room then, wearing fuzzy pink slippers and a brown polyester fleece robe with white and yellow daisies stitched around the hems. She looks like she just woke up. Her eyes are half-closed and her brow is furrowed against the light coming in through the curtains. Her speech slurs when she says: “Gordon, you’re not bothering Johnny, are you?”

“No ma’am,” says Johnny. “I was already wide-awake.”

“Okay then. Good.” She rubs her temples as if she has a headache. Gordon’s mother suffers from migraines, or so she claims. The medicine closet down the hallway is full of painkillers—Darvon, Percodan, Codeine, Dilaudid—and Gordon can usually tell when she’s taken something, as she has this morning. Lately, it seems she takes at least five or six pills every day.

“Headache, Mrs. Swannson?” Johnny asks like a true gentleman.

“The worst. I took two Demerols, but so far they haven’t even touched it.”

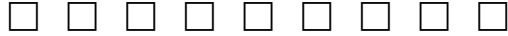
“How’s Mal doin’? The Doc got him shot fulla morphine?”

“I wish. I would’ve asked for a shot, too. But Doctor Brockett said no painkillers because of all the alcohol in his system.” She turns to Gordon. “Shouldn’t you be getting some breakfast, Mister?”

THE FALL

Reluctantly, Gordon trudges off toward the kitchen.

“Bring my cigarettes while you’re at it,” Cynthia growls after him.



By around noon, Cynthia is feeling much better. As a matter of fact, she’s high. She calls up Janice Marrsden and they decide to go see a movie together. *The Exorcist* is the one everyone’s talking about. Cynthia has already read the book. She usually sticks to Harlequin Romances—she goes through two or three a week, can’t get enough of them, for some reason. But most of them tell the same story: a young woman falls for a tall, handsome stranger. At some point Cynthia realized that a girl possessed by the devil is pretty much the same thing, only kinkier.

Janice drives over in her blue 1966 Mustang with Jimmy in the backseat. “Stan is off calming down some pissed-off farmer,” Janice announces. “Somebody painted a big sign on his barn that said, ‘*Bong Hits 4 Jesus*.’”

“Never a dull moment when you’re married to the Chief of Police,” says Cynthia, feeling a giddy hilarity fueled by fifteen cigarettes and a second round of Demerol.

“Oh, it gets plenty dull, believe me,” says Janice. “Anyway, I couldn’t find a babysitter, so I thought I’d bring ol’ Jimmy-Toad along with us. *The Swiss Family Robinson* is showing at the same time on another screen. Why don’t you bring Gordon? We’ll make it a double date.”

A deep-lined frown creases Cynthia’s face as she thinks about Gordon tagging along after them. Why can’t she be more like Janice, who takes Jimmy with her everywhere like some dog she adores? But at least Jimmy is borderline normal, as far as little boys go. Gordon is always embarrassing her with his cutesy-pie intellectual observations. He runs around making jokes about Nikola Tesla—or some crusty old monk that no one on God’s green earth has ever heard of—then he expects everyone to laugh. She tells him no one likes a Mister Smarty-Pants. Sometimes she’d like to shoot the lippy little punk. But she knows that would be wrong.

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So she goes and gets Gordon. He's so excited to be seeing a movie that he practically dives into the backseat with Jimmy. With matching glee, Jimmy peels back a Band-Aid on his elbow to show Gordon a scab. It's a green, gelatinous thing, like amphibian skin. Maybe there's more to this Jimmy-Toad business than Janice has been letting on.

It's another scorcher of a day. They drive along Highway 99 to Fresno with the windows rolled down because the Mustang's air conditioner is broken. Cynthia's back feels sticky against the black vinyl seat. Janice has a Tupperware jug of iced tea that gets passed around, ice cubes tumbling around inside it like rocks. The boys leave their slobber on the spout, but Cynthia swigs from it again, anyway. The heat makes rude behavior seem natural, almost a celebration of living.

Gordon and Jimmy are sweating like little pigs. They've peeled off their T-shirts and have just noticed that they each have a tiny supernumerary nipple just below the regular nipple on their left breast.

"Mom!" Jimmy shouts to be heard above the wind and freeway noise, "me and Gordon both have three tits!"

"I guess you must be twins!" Janice jokes back at them.

The boys seem extremely pleased by this information. They hug each other. "See? I always knew we were brothers," says Jimmy.

"I wonder who our real mom is—your mom or my mom?" says Gordon. And then quietly, but not so quietly that Cynthia doesn't hear: "I hope your mom."

That ungrateful little bastard!

"And what about our dads? Your dad, or my dad?" asks Jimmy.

"My dad. He's bigger."

"But my dad could put your dad in jail."

"For what? Having sex with your mom?"

"That's enough now, Gordon!" Cynthia glares at him from over the top of the front seat. She wants to reach back there and smack him, but she restrains herself.

Gordon and Jimmy look at each other with big fake grimaces of fear, as if they're wearing skeleton masks.

"Those third nipples are called Witch's Teats," Janice informs them, not noticing the grotesque look of malice on Cynthia's face.

THE FALL

“People used to believe that witches had them so they could to suckle their black cats.”

“So we’re witches?” Jimmy asks, incredulous.

“No, silly. It’s just an old superstition. People get third nipples because it’s a genetic fluke, like blue eyes or crooked fingers. Lots of people have them.”

“So we’re not twins.” Gordon looks disappointed.

“Probably not,” says Janice, as she steers around a Volkswagen bus chugging up a steep overpass, “unless there was some mix-up around the time you were born.”

The boys’ faces brighten. At least there’s still hope.



Three hours later, Cynthia and Janice emerge dazed and blinking from the Fig Garden Cinema Complex. They don their sunglasses and fire up menthol cigarettes as soon as they see the sun. “*Oh... my... god...*” says Janice, bearing down on her first inhalation.

“Kind of makes you think it might be time to start going to church again, hmm?” says Cynthia, already gargling smoke.

“Either that, or start dating a priest.” Janice turns to look at Jimmy and Gordon standing behind her in the doorway with the theater’s powerful air conditioning blowing against their thin T-shirts. They’re both shivering. She asks, “So how’d you like your movie, Jimmy-Toad?”

Jimmy appears too stunned to even answer. He moves his mouth like a goldfish, but no sound comes out.

The boys, of course, had gotten bored with *The Swiss Family Robinson* and decided to sneak in to see *The Exorcist* for themselves. They found seats in the back row of the theater just as the creepy girl was peeing on the carpet in front of an astronaut, so they naturally assumed the movie was a comedy—even though no one in the audience was laughing. But by the time the girl’s face turned ugly and she started stabbing herself between the legs with a crucifix and throwing up green gunk in people’s faces, they thought otherwise. Gordon and Jimmy were scared right out of their minds.

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“That, uh... *tree house* was pretty good,” Gordon volunteers, trying to cover for his buddy.

“Yeah, real neato...” Jimmy manages to squeak out.

They shudder like ducks shaking water from their backs, then run out into the sunlight baking the cars in the parking lot. Cynthia knows something is up, but Janice is oblivious. Jumping up and down by the side of the Mustang, Jimmy asks his mother if they can go to Farrell’s for ice cream. It’s just on the other side of the mall. Janice takes a drag off her cigarette and looks to Cynthia for guidance. Cynthia shrugs. “Okay, we’ll meet you brats over there,” Janice shouts, blowing smoke.

“You’ll have to eat some dinner first!” Cynthia yells, just to show them who’s boss. But they’re already running.

Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlor is not Cynthia’s idea of fine dining, but the boys love it. The wait staff wears straw boaters, striped vests, and starched white shirts with garters on the sleeves. The whole place looks like a turn-of-the-century whorehouse with fake Tiffany lamps hanging above every table and red brocade wallpaper on the walls. An old upright player piano kicks out manic Dixieland jazz for a quarter. Demented bells and sirens go off and crazy lights flash whenever someone has a birthday or orders a special ice cream sundae called The Pig Trough. It’s enough to give old men heart attacks and make parents wish their children had never been born.

If it were up to Gordon and Jimmy, they’d eat there every night. Farrell’s is especially on their minds around birthday time. If you sign up on the Farrell’s Fabulous Birthday Party List, on the designated day you get free ice cream sundaes. All you can eat. Farrell’s will later sell that list of names and birthday dates (some 167,000 names in all) to an envoy of the U.S. government, which will result in Gordon and Jimmy finding themselves in possession of darkly worded letters from the Selective Service when they turn eighteen, reminding them to register for the draft:

*You’ve had your ice cream, birthday boys...
now it’s time to sacrifice your lives
on the glorious field of battle.*

THE FALL

That bit of unpleasantness is far in the future, however. For the moment, all Gordon and Jimmy have to worry about is what to order for dinner. Gordon suggests something light, so they'll have room for ice cream later. To Cynthia and Janice's unspoken horror, the boys order split pea soup. Cynthia thinks to herself, *My god, those little shitweasels must've snuck in to The Exorcist and seen Linda Blair puking on the priest....* That suspicion is confirmed when the soup arrives. Neither Gordon nor Jimmy can find the will to eat it.

"Jimmy, you ordered that soup, now eat it, damnit," says Janice. She opens up a new pack of cigarettes, tearing at the cellophane with talon-like Lee Press-On nails.

"You heard her, Gordon," says Cynthia. "Eat it or wear it."

Jimmy shovels a few spoonfuls of soup into his mouth, grimacing. With bored nonchalance, Gordon picks up his soup bowl and balances it between his fingertips above his head. Sirens go off and the lights start flashing. A ragtime tune erupts from the player piano. Some imbecile has ordered another Pig Trough.

"I guess I'll... *wear it*," says Gordon as he upends the soup bowl over his head, to great green effect.

Before anyone can move, Gordon arranges his knife and fork in the shape of a crucifix and shouts at Jimmy: "I cast thee out, you damn devil!"

Jimmy spits a stream of pea soup in Gordon's ear and yells back: "Eat my barf, preacher guy!"

Gordon splashes a glass of water in Jimmy's face, saying, "Have some holy water, Satan!"

Gasping, snarling, cursing like a seven-year-old demon, Jimmy clutches at his throat and pretends to melt. In the background, two freckle-faced waiters doff their boaters as they hoist an ice cream laden Pig Trough to their shoulders and rush around with it like Keystone Cops.

Cynthia and Janice take long drags off their cigarettes, stub them out in the ashtray, and then lunge at their sons. The boys run screaming from the table to join the chaos that is Farrell's on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Fresno, California—a place where every soul

must make a choice between good and evil: a fresh green salad or The Pig Trough.

The Pig Trough usually wins out.



Looking back, Gordon wasn't quite sure when he first got the notion that Jimmy was in league with the devil—but it was early on. Maybe it was when he found out that Jimmy had green blood. Or maybe it was in the restaurant after they saw *The Exorcist*, when Jimmy played the role of the Satan-possessed youngster just a little too well. Regardless of where the initial hint came from, by the time Gordon spends the night at Jimmy's house a few weeks later, he's convinced that Jimmy has somehow sold his seven-year-old soul.

Jimmy's parents aren't rich, but he has all the things Gordon has ever wanted. He has his own basement bedroom with blue shag carpeting and knotty pine paneling and a workbench across the far wall. He has a microscope, comic books, remote-controlled airplanes, dinosaur teeth, geodes, and a ham radio (*so powerful it can talk to men on the Moon!*) all arranged on neat shelves. There's a saltwater fish tank built into the closet under the stairs. A mummified six-foot-long crocodile dangles from the rafters like a malevolent piñata. It's a little boy's version of paradise and Gordon doesn't think Jimmy deserves it at all.

Jimmy is obsessed with electronics. His parents buy him Heath Kits so he can build whatever his greedy heart desires. On the night of the sleepover, Jimmy enlists Gordon to help him build a Heath Kit Quadraphonic Stereo Receiver. All night long Gordon has been hearing, "That's where the resistor goes, not a capacitor, Dumbo..." and other quips full of scorn and derision. Jimmy can read schematics and Gordon can't. That fact alone seems to indicate a Satanic influence, at least to Gordon's way of thinking. He wonders if Jimmy planned wisely for the future when he made his pact with the devil, or if he'll just wind up spending the rest of his life reading comic books and working as a preternaturally knowledgeable television repairman.

THE FALL

“Hey, did you see my new tooth?” Jimmy points his soldering iron at a huge, blackened shark tooth set up for display on the shelf next to them. “It’s from a dinosaur. My dad said it’s at least 200 million years old.”

“It looks like a megalodon tooth,” says Gordon, glad to be back in one of his areas of expertise.

“What’s a megalodon?”

“Sort of a prehistoric shark—only bigger than even the biggest great white. *Carcharodon megalodon* is its full name. I saw a picture of its fossilized jaws once, with five scientists sitting inside it. Its teeth looked just like this.”

“So in a fight between a megalodon and a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, who would win?”

“In water or on land?”

“Both.”

“A megalodon could bite a *T-rex*’s head off. No problem.”

“Cool!”

Gordon stands up to get a closer look at the tooth. It’s as black as obsidian and bigger than his fist. Its edges still look sharp enough to shave the hair off his arms, even after nine million years. “Where’d you get it?” he asks.

Jimmy points to a square wooden door on the left side of his workbench. “In there, under the house. I’ve dug up all kinds of cool junk. It must’ve been something like an Indian burial ground. Or a troll’s secret hiding place.”

There’s something about the wooden door that Gordon finds ominous. He knows Jimmy’s just joking about the troll, but he could easily imagine finding that same door on a tree stump in a forest, leading to the lair of some evil, bone-gnawing dwarf.

Jimmy swings the door open on its rust-caked hinges and reveals a vast, musty darkness. A labyrinth of cobwebs, concrete posts, and water pipes can just barely be seen beyond the doorway. There’s a smell of raw earth and something stronger, like stale cat piss or an old wino’s vomit. Gordon thinks he hears rats scurrying back where the light doesn’t penetrate. “Aren’t you scared to go in there?” he asks.

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"I always take a flashlight with me," Jimmy tells him, "and a rope that's tied to my bed so I won't get lost."

Gordon tries to remember if the San Joaquin Valley was underwater back when megalodons swam the world's oceans. Could Jimmy really have found a fossil under there? He's not sure. He just wants Jimmy to close that door... *before something comes through it*. Gordon asks himself why he's having thoughts like that, but there's no rational explanation. He just is, that's all.

Janice calls down to them from the top of the stairs: "Jimmy, Gordon, time to hit the hay!"

"Okay, Mom!" Jimmy shouts back. He shuts the crawlspace door and unplugs the soldering irons. Gordon relaxes, although he'd feel a lot safer if the door could be locked. Maybe having a basement bedroom wouldn't be so great after all.

Later, after they've changed into their pajamas, Gordon asks Jimmy if they can listen for astronauts talking on the ham radio. Jimmy claims he's also heard pirates and ghosts broadcasting messages late at night, so Gordon is curious. But instead, Jimmy wants to listen to a record player (soon to be replaced by his quadraphonic stereo system) that he keeps next to his bed. He sets the needle down and slowly turns up the volume.

"What's this?" Gordon asks when he hears the first eerie strains of orchestral music. It sounds like it was recorded in cavernous room inside a dark, faraway castle.

"*Shhhh!*" Jimmy puts a finger to his lips, whispering, "Just listen. This is the scariest record I know." He turns on a little lamp by the record player and shows Gordon the album jacket. A blazing red Phoenix is rising from the ashes of a stylized bonfire, like some nightmare vision after falling asleep during Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. It's Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*.

"Where'd you get that?" Gordon asks. He's seen that bird somewhere before.

"*Shhhh!*" Jimmy hushes him again. He turns out the light.

They both pull the covers up to their chins and stare at the crawlspace door across the room, which can just barely be made out after their eyes adjust to the darkness. The music is making Gordon's

scalp tingle in a not completely unpleasant way. There's something delightful about spookiness when you're seven years old and your best friend is beside you to talk about it.

"Hey, Jimmy," Gordon whispers, "do you ever worry about a monster coming through that hole?"

"Sometimes, yeah," Jimmy whispers back.

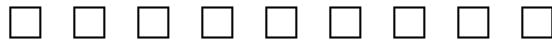
"How do you sleep?"

"I figure if a monster was gonna kill me, I'd already be dead by now. So if there's a monster, it must be my friend."

"What if it's just waiting until you get fatter?"

"Then I don't know. I'll get ate, I guess."

Jimmy rolls over on his side with a yawn and pulls the blanket up over his head. Gordon keeps staring at the crawlspace door, even though it scares him. But it scares him even more to look away from it. Stravinsky is filling his mind with images of headless knights on skeletal horses, a sinister queen cloaked in ravens' wings, a dagger with a handle of rubies. Jimmy's breathing has become loud and rhythmic. Gordon lies there wondering if there really *is* a monster behind the crawlspace door. If there is, he doesn't want to make friends with it. But Jimmy does. Gordon stares into the dark, thinking, *If they've made the kind of deal I think they have, they'll be together for a really, really long time.*



At first he thinks he's having an asthma attack. Not yet awake and he's already feeling the familiar internal desperation, like breathing through cotton. There's an invisible weight pressing down on his chest, constricting his lungs. The Japanese have a word for the feeling—*kanashibara*—"to tie with an iron rope." Gordon's throat aches and his tongue itches. His shoulders are hunched up around his ears. Each breath is a struggle. When he opens his eyes, no more air will come.

He immediately sees why: he's still in bed in Jimmy's basement and Jimmy is perched on his chest like an incubus, sucking the breath right from his nose. In a creaky, old-witch-in-the-woods whisper, Jimmy leans close to Gordon's ear and says, "Jimmy-Toad!" then croaks like a maleficent frog.

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With the last of what little strength remains to him, Gordon thrashes under the covers and pushes Jimmy off. Jimmy laughs and scampers up the stairs in his underpants, leaving Gordon behind to rummage around for his Primatene inhaler, which he finally finds on the floor in the left front pocket of his wadded up shorts.

“Gordon! Time for breakfast!” Mrs. Marrsden yells.

It takes three hits of Primatene before Gordon can even sit up.

Breakfast consists of glazed doughnuts and Shasta Root Beer, yet another way in which Jimmy’s life seems superior to Gordon’s own. It doesn’t cross Gordon’s mind that he could easily fortify his morning bowl of Super Sugar Smacks with Coca-Cola for a similar wake-up jolt.

The boys head out into the backyard with their doughnuts to check on the progress of Jimmy’s latest manifestation of good fortune. Jimmy’s dad has been out there every weekend all summer, building a tree house for him on top of an old telephone pole planted in the middle of the lawn.

They arrive just in time to see a crane lowering a thatched roof onto the top tier’s gazebo-like posts. “Pretty neat, huh?” Jimmy says, as his father—four-stories up—unhooks the cable and signals for the crane to move off.

Gordon drops his doughnut in absent-minded amazement. It’s as if The Swiss Family Robinson has packed up their island and moved it to Jimmy’s backyard. The tree house has three interconnected levels of roped-bamboo walls, Plexiglas windows, and driftwood-fenced terraces—all on sturdy redwood platforms. It’s all so elaborate that Gordon wouldn’t be surprised if it had electricity and indoor plumbing. A rope ladder leads to a trapdoor at the bottom of the first platform—the only way in or out. He can’t wait to go up.

“Man, your dad’s so cool!” Gordon says, bouncing around with excitement.

“I know,” says Jimmy. “You should have your dad make you one, too.”

Gordon’s face darkens. He knows the prospects for a tree house of his own aren’t good. He can already imagine the conversation:

“Dad? Do you think you could help me build a tree house?”

His father, on the floor watching television. “A tree house? Where?”

THE FALL

"In the backyard. In a tree."

"Sounds like a waste of a lot of good lumber, if you want my opinion."

"But you own a lumberyard."

"That's right. And lumber is money. It doesn't just grow on trees."

"Well, technically, it does, Dad."

"Don't be an ass, son. Smart-alecks never get anything nice done for them."

End of discussion, with the usual sting.

Maybe Gordon can dig a very deep hole somewhere and go live in it, but a tree house is probably out of the question.

Mr. Marrsden waves down at them. "What do you think, guys? Like it?" The boys shout their appreciation, jumping around like feral puppies. Gordon has let enthusiasm overcome him again without even realizing it. He asks—practically begs—Jimmy, "Can we go up inside?"

"Not unless you're member of the Order," says Jimmy, suddenly pretending to be much older than Gordon.

Sensing that Jimmy has stopped acting like his friend, but not understanding why, Gordon asks, "What Order?"

"The Tree House Order of Jacques de Molay."

"Who's Jacques de Molay?"

"Some medieval knight who got burned at the stake and turned into a ghost."

"Cool! So how do I become a member?"

"There's some stuff you have to do."

"Like what?"

"You know. Stuff."

It turns out Jimmy has a membership contract drawn up in red crayon on a piece of graph paper folded up in his back pocket. He takes it out and shows it to Gordon.

Prospective members are allowed to join the Tree House Order of Jacques de Molay in one of two unnatural ways. The first option—which Gordon immediately rejects—is to climb up on the roof of the Kingsburg United Methodist Church and hum "The Star Spangled Banner" with Jimmy's wiener in his mouth. Jimmy finds this proposition hilarious and swears that Timothy Lundquist has already

joined the Order via this unorthodox method. The second option—which Gordon deigns to consider—is to offer up three talismanic items: a Troll Doll, a hatchet, and a hangman’s noose from a dead man’s garage.

“Where am I supposed to find a dead man’s garage?” Gordon asks, quite sensibly.

“I know where there’s one,” says Jimmy, “but you should probably do that last.”

So Gordon sets out on his mission. The Troll Doll is easy. They sell for \$5.99 over at **Gunnarsson’s Toy Shoppe**. He just has to raise some quick cash. To that end, he goes up and down the alleys of his neighborhood, searching through trashcans for pop bottles. He gets five cents for the small ones and ten cents for the big ones when he turns them in to the grocery clerks at **Ivan’s Swedish Market**. It’s dirty, sticky work, but Gordon doesn’t mind. He likes the idea of making money from what other people throw away.

It’s getting dark by the time Gordon heads for home lugging the big Hefty bag full of pop bottles on his back. He thinks he has around fifty bottles, enough to buy a troll doll when combined with the few dollars he already has in the little bronze stagecoach bank that the teller at Wells Fargo gave him when he opened a savings account. Sweat has turned the dirt on his arms and face to muddy smears. He reeks of rotten garbage and old lawn clippings. He keeps to the alleys to avoid being seen. As he passes behind his grandmother’s house, he sets the bag down next to her stockade cedar fence to rest.

Gordon peeks through a knothole to see if Grandma Helen is out in her garden, planting Maidenhair ferns or clipping away at her wild rose bushes. That’s where she’s usually found in the late afternoon, but apparently not in this heat. If he weren’t so dirty, he’d stop in to see her. He likes to sit on the black swivel chair in her kitchen and drink the cups of coffee she always makes for him, diluted with milk and sweetened with sugar. Sometimes she’ll put on her cat’s-eye glasses and read the newspaper with him. On other occasions she’ll tell him stories about what his father was like before Gordon was born. Gordon has been given the impression that his father led a much more adventurous life than he has so far. His father raised his own cattle to earn spending money when he was a boy. He broke his arm trying to jump a go-kart

over an irrigation ditch. He was a consummate water-skier. Gordon is just Gordon. Nothing much, in comparison—just asthma and weird dreams. No wonder his father isn't impressed.

To the left of his grandmother's house, in the Smiley's backyard, there's a loquat tree growing above the fence. It produces a dusky orange fruit shaped like a tiny pear. Gordon climbs up on the fence to get one. It tastes like a bland apricot, but to Gordon's tongue—because it's free—there's nothing sweeter. He's feeling like quite the survivalist today, feeding himself on the bounty of nature and extracting cash from garbage cans. He parts the glossy dark green leaves and plucks another loquat. As he's doing so, he hears a dog yelp in the Smiley's backyard.

The Smileys are rich. They have a stone pond with its own waterfall, expensive landscaping, and a white wrought iron table with matching chairs in their backyard—but they don't have a dog. Gordon peers through the branches of the loquat tree, trying to see what's going on. He can't find an unobstructed line of sight, but he thinks he can make out six or seven adults standing in a circle in the middle of the Smiley's patio. For the most part, what he sees is their feet. Wingtips, old canvas boat shoes, and a pair of red leather sandals like the ones his mother wears.

In the middle of the circle there's a dog—a big, chocolate-colored Doberman pinscher. It looks like the Rowley's dog, Raymundo. And this is when Gordon feels the first onrush of terror (hair raising on the back of his neck, a sound like the ocean filling his ears), because all four of the dog's legs are off the ground, kicking, and even though no one is touching it.

The dog twists and contorts its body, its eyes bulging in terror. It appears to be strangling in midair. The adults just stand there watching, unmoving. Gordon thinks he can make out Doctor Smiley, with his ever-present bow tie, but through the thickness of the leaves it's hard to see anything much above their waists. He hopes they can't see him. The whimpering of the dog has become unbearable. It's like a small person screaming. Then there's a dull snap—like a piece of wood breaking under a mattress pad—and the dog goes limp. It drops to the ground with a thud. Gordon drops off the fence a split-second later and runs away down the alley.

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He doesn't even think to grab his bag full of bottles. He runs as if he's being chased—if not physically, then spiritually, somehow.... He feels a glittering, almost invisible presence skimming along behind him—like a winged demon—ready pounce on him the moment he slows down. He doesn't let up until he gets to his house, where he sees the garage door open (his mother's car gone) and runs right up inside to pound on the back door. Nobody is home. The door is locked. Gordon, in his panic, can't find his key. So he goes through the door at the far end of the garage, into the backyard, where he hides himself in Sam's doghouse. It's dark and hot and full of dog hair in there, but it's the only place he can think of that feels safe.

Eventually, Sam finds him there. She comes in through the black rubber door flap, collar chain tinkling, and pokes at him with her wet, snuffling nose. Gordon pets her and talks quietly to her, listening to the rhythms of her breathing. When she lies down next to him, he puts his arms around her. He doesn't let go until he hears his father's car pulling into the garage.



Who can he tell? And what would he say? And who would believe him, anyway? He's the boy who cried Easter Bunny. No one is going to take him seriously if he says the adults in his neighborhood are levitating dogs and killing them.

If he tells his father, he'll get the standard response: "You read too many books, kiddo..." then Mal will go right back to watching the news about President Nixon and the Watergate hearings. If he tells his mother... but there's no way he would ever tell his mother. He keeps picturing those red sandals—the same ones he saw her wearing when he crawled out of the doghouse and went inside to find her in the kitchen making dinner. *She could have been there.*

He considers telling his Grandma Helen. When he goes back down the alley the next day to get the bottles he left beside her fence, he looks through the knothole and sees her watering the ferns on her back porch. He climbs up on the fence to say hello.

"Gordon! What are you doing up there, honeybug?"

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"Hi, Grandma. I was just out collecting bottles."

"Did you find many?"

"Yeah, a lot. How's your garden?"

"Just fine, Sweetie. I still love the little pagoda you made for me. It's the prettiest thing in the whole place."

Gordon had made a miniature pagoda, about two feet high, out of old lumber scraps for his grandmother's birthday a few years ago. Looking at it now, it strikes him as rather shabby.

"Hey, Grandma? Did the Smiley's get a dog?"

Grandma Helen, always pale, seems to go a shade paler. "No—not that I know of. Why?" She tugs on her gardening gloves.

"I just thought I heard a dog back there when I was walking by the other day. But I didn't see anything." Gordon silently congratulates himself on that bit of subterfuge. If anyone is listening to his conversation from the Smiley's backyard, they won't think he was a witness to their evil dog murdering.

"I don't think the Smileys are the kind of people who'd own a dog. They're very nice, but they travel a lot." She points her watering can in the direction of the Smiley's yard, which seems ominously silent. The only sound is from a sparrow flitting around in the loquat tree.

"I guess I was just hearing stuff then," says Gordon. "Probably someone else's dog somewhere."

"That could be.... Y'know, Gordon, Doctor Smiley's supposed to be a brilliant pediatrician. Maybe he could help you with your asthma."

Gordon thinks, *Maybe he could kill my dog while he's at it.* "I like Doctor Brockett just fine," is all he says to his grandmother.

"But Doctor Smiley's up on all the latest medical advances. I was talking with him in the driveway not too long ago. I was amazed by what he said they can do with surgery these days."

A creepy tingle runs up and down Gordon's spine. His mother has been telling him for years now that she's going to volunteer him for exploratory surgery when he's a teenager, so the doctors can open up his lungs and see how his asthma works. Gordon has told his mother that he doesn't want to be operated on—the thought actually gives him nightmares—but she insists it's his duty to all the other poor, asthmatic children of the world. She gets a very noble look on her face whenever

the subject comes up, as if she's imagining herself bravely sacrificing her only son to the cause of science. Her only son apparently doesn't have any say in the matter.

"Okay, Grandma. I guess I'll go turn in those bottles now," Gordon says, feeling the first tickling of an asthma attack at the base of his throat.

"Can't you stay and have some coffee?"

"I should go. I've got stuff I have to do at the lumberyard right after this." That's not precisely true. Gordon intends to steal a hatchet from his father's hardware store after he returns his bottles, but he can do that any time. There's just no reason to hang around with his grandmother now that he's decided not to tell her about what he saw in the Smiley's backyard last night. She thinks they're nice neighbors. He might as well let her keep thinking that. She doesn't have a dog for them to murder, anyway. "See ya later," he says, and hops off the fence.

It's about half a mile to the grocery store. By the time he gets there, Gordon is dripping with sweat again. He catches the attention of the first person he sees wearing one of the dark blue checkout clerk's smocks. It's a woman with big pores, drawn-on eyebrows, and scary beet-colored hair piled up in the shape of a beehive. She doesn't look pleased. She tells Gordon to wait outside by the automatic glass doors until she can find the time to count his bottles. Twenty minutes later, she finally comes out and empties Gordon's bag into a shopping cart, adding up the bottles as they clank and clang against the wire frame. "Fourteen... eighteen... twenty-three...." Her big, meaty red lips are flaked with old lipstick. Deep creases ring her too-tan neck and loop along the underside of her collarbone. Gordon can smell old cigarette smoke wafting off her clothes. She seems exhausted by something beyond just her job. She also seems very mean.

"Two dollars and thirty cents, kid. Take it or leave it," says the beehive-headed beet-hair lady. The whites of her eyes are shot through with red veins.

"I thought I had more," Gordon says.

"Like I said, 'Take it or leave it.'"

Gordon takes it and gets the heck out of there. He's not sure he has enough money for the Troll Doll now, but he decides to go to **Gunnarsson's Toy Shoppe**, anyway. It's just up the street.

The white double doors to **Gunnarsson's** have diamond-paned windows. Orange and yellow painted tulips curl around the door handles and a little silver bell tinkles as Gordon goes inside. Mr. Gunnarsson sits behind the cash register with his back against a wall of model ships and airplanes. As always, he's wearing a bright red Swedish vest and smoking a little black pipe. He's old, with a long Scandinavian face that shows two or three days' worth of bristly, gray beard. He frowns when he sees Gordon, but he's always frowning, even when he's happy.

"Young Master Swannson," Mr. Gunnarsson greets him, taking the pipe from between his teeth. "What can I help you with today? Another Corvette model? Or perhaps some freakish hot rod?"

Revell puts out a line of model car kits designed by Ed "Big Daddy" Roth that has fascinated Gordon for quite some time. The boxes advertise slavering, hairy eyeballed monsters driving pinstriped hot rods with oversized gearshifts. They go by names like Mr. Gasser, Drag Nut, Rat Fink, and the Beatnik Bandit. Gordon bought one of these kits a few months back and was disappointed to find out that the monster wasn't included. Consequently, his next purchase was a scale model of a 1958 Corvette, just like the one his father used to drive. He thought it might be something his dad would be interested in—maybe they could even build it together. But from the time Gordon covered half of the kitchen table with old newspapers and got out his modeling glue, until he cleaned up a few days later after putting a final coat of varnish on the Corvette's cherry red exterior, his father never paid the slightest bit of attention. Gordon put the finished model on the desk in his bedroom, but for some reason it made him sad to look at it, so he eventually hid it away.

"I think I want a Troll Doll this time," Gordon says.

"Oh, those are terrible, beastly things," Mr. Gunnarsson says with what almost amounts to glee.

There's a whole shelf of Troll Dolls on display in a glass case. They look like squat, deranged toddlers—all of them naked, devoid of genitalia, but endowed with bloated little bellies and enormous shocks of purple and pink polyester hair. Why Jimmy likes them so much is a mystery to Gordon. He just finds them creepy. They remind him of Freud's thoughts on polymorphous perversity, a kind of open-armed

lewdness that says, “*Give me a hug while I hump your leg.*” Gordon selects the least creepy Troll Doll from the lot—the only one with blue hair—and asks Mr. Gunnarsson to help him get it out of the case.

“That comes to a grand total of six dollars and thirty-five cents,” Mr. Gunnarsson says, back at the cash register.

Gordon forgot about sales tax. He’s almost sure he doesn’t have enough money now. He empties his pockets, putting handfuls of change and a few crumpled dollar bills on the counter. He watches with increasing anxiety as the old man counts it.

“You’ve got five dollars and ninety-six cents here, Gordon. You’re about forty cents shy.”

“I guess I’ll have to come back tomorrow,” Gordon says, embarrassed. But 40-cents worth of bottles shouldn’t be hard to find.

“No, I’ll tell you what. I’ll make up the difference out of my own pocket.”

Now Gordon is *really* embarrassed. Mr. Gunnarsson must sense his discomfort, because the next thing he says is: “You can pay me back later, if it troubles you. But you’re my good customer, and good customers deserve a break every now and then.”

A flood of gratitude almost brings tears to Gordon’s eyes. It’s so unusual to find a grown-up who wants to do anything nice for him. The hostility of the beehive-headed beet-hair lady at **Ivan’s Swedish Market** is closer to Gordon’s everyday expectations. He feels a wild impulse to reach across the counter and give Mr. Gunnarsson a hug. Instead, he just says, “Thanks,” with a shy smile. Then he takes the Troll Doll in its white paper sack with the **Gunnarsson’s** logo and runs outside.

Blinking in the bright sunlight reflected off Kingsburg’s wide sidewalks, Gordon decides to head to the lumberyard next. He enters through a gate in the cyclone fence out in back, where he finds Johnny Hoss sitting in the cool shade of the nail shed, rebuilding an alternator from the air conditioning crew’s van. Mike Shriver is there, too, perched on a nail keg watching him while practicing sailor’s knots on a length of grimy twine.

“Gordo! Crown Prince of the Swannson Lumber Empire. Little Lord of the Two-by-Fours. How may we assist you?” With a snaggle-

toothed smirk, Mike gives a crisp salute from the brim of his Benjamin Moore Paint cap. Somehow, as if he's clairvoyant, Mike seems to be mocking what just transpired between Gordon and Mr. Gunnarsson.

"Shut up, Mike," Gordon says. He's never talked back to an adult that way before. He feels a vivid, electric thrill in the tips of his ears as he wonders if Mike is going to hit him. But with Johnny there, he's pretty sure he can get away with it.

In fact, Johnny is chuckling and rubbing his greasy fingers on the back of his oily, crewcut scalp. "I been wantin' to say that all day. Good for you, Gordon."

"Y'know, if you weren't the boss' son, I'd beat the livin' crap out of you," Mike says.

"But I am and you're not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing...." Gordon's courage is ebbing.

"He thinks he's better than us," Mike says to Johnny, "because he's gonna inherit this place someday and then he'll get to lord it all over us."

"I hope I'm around to see it," says Johnny, "'cause that'll be the day I get me a big ol' fat raise. Ain't that right, Gordon?"

"Right," says Gordon. "Only I don't want it. The business, I mean."

"Why not?" Johnny asks him. "You get to sit around on your butt all day in a nice air-conditioned office. Put your feet up on the desk and let somebody else do all the damn work. That ain't so bad, is it?"

"I guess not. But I want to do something else."

"Like what?" Mike asks, outraged. "What're you gonna do? Sell cotton candy? Jack-off roosters, like Johnny?"

"I don't know. I'm only seven..." Gordon shrugs.

"There's a lotta money in them roosters, if you got the thumbs for it," Johnny muses, looking straight at Mike. "You might wanna try it after Gordon takes this place over and fires your sorry ass."

"You little dickhead," Mike says to Gordon in disgust, "you have no idea how good you've got it." He gets up and leaves as Johnny leans back laughing at him.

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After Mike is gone, Johnny points to the sack from **Gunnarsson's** that Gordon is still holding. "What's in the bag?" he asks. "You bring your lunch?"

"It's just a Troll Doll."

"Well, you gonna let me see it?"

Gordon takes the Troll Doll out of the sack and shows it to Johnny.

"Ugly little sucker, ain't it?"

Gordon just nods his head.

"I seen worse, though. Some of them dead gooks in Vietnam had little bellies on 'em like that. They'd get that way after layin' out in the sun for a few days. Then they'd bust wide open full of maggots and the vultures would eat 'em." Johnny clacks his teeth.

"Gross..." says Gordon. Then he's sees his opportunity to unload the secret he's been carrying. Johnny will listen to him. "I saw a dog get killed last night," he says.

"Killed? Like how? Hit by a car?" Johnny peers into Gordon's face, looking for answers.

"No... a lot weirder than that. My grandma's neighbors killed it on purpose—with their minds." Gordon goes on to tell Johnny about everything he saw in the Smiley's backyard last night.

Johnny seems to believe him. "You really think that mighta been your mama standin' back there with all them other dog killers?" he asks Gordon.

"I'm not sure. All I saw was her shoes. But she wasn't home when I got home."

"That don't mean nothin'."

"But when I saw her she was wearing the same sandals."

"You got anything else?"

"I guess not," Gordon says, still feeling a desperate urge to talk. "But there's this story my mom always tells about how poor she was when she was growing up. She was adopted. Her mom and dad were missionaries. They just lived off donations from the church, which hardly paid anything. So, anyway... my mom had these rabbits for pets, Blackie and Humphrey. And one night, after there hadn't been much food in the house for a while, they had a big chicken dinner. Or

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at least my mom thought it was chicken. Only it tasted weird. And when she asked what it was, they told her it was rabbit. They'd just eaten Blackie."

Johnny bursts out laughing. "Oh man, your momma musta been pissed!"

"She was. But maybe now she's getting revenge."

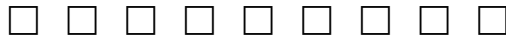
"How? By killin' other people's pets?"

"I don't know—something like that."

"What'd you have for dinner last night?"

"Spare ribs." Gordon can already see where this is going.

"Maybe they was *Doberman* ribs...." Johnny raises his eyebrows in feigned horror, then grabs Gordon in a headlock and tickles him until he's out of breath.



There was more to the story about his mother's rabbits, an epilogue that Gordon neglected to tell Johnny because he didn't really understand it himself. His grandparents on his mother's side were millionaires many times over. His grandmother had inherited a fortune in stocks and bonds from her bachelor uncle, a famous New York patent attorney, shortly after she married Gordon's grandfather. They became Methodist missionaries and lived out the remainder of their lives in poverty by deliberate choice. Gordon's mother only found out about this after both of her parents had died and she saw their will, which distributed the millions among various Christian charities and right-wing think tanks. Gordon's mother "got zilch" as she put it—just a twenty-two-year-old mobile home in a Vacaville trailer park and a fake diamond brooch. It infuriated her to think that she'd been forced to eat her pet rabbits for dinner while her parents were "rolling in dough." There were some nights when it was all she could talk about.

Gordon's father was blasé about the whole story. "Look, it's no big deal..." he'd say. "We inherited a bundle, too—and you don't see me telling you to go to church, or to cut out all your damn shopping sprees. So just be grateful."

"That's not the point!" Gordon's mother shouted. But the point she was trying to make always remained obscure. Her parents were God-fearing maniacs. They hadn't been very good at distinguishing between pets and food. It was tragic, in its way, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Still, she kept obsessing over it. As her monologues wore on, Gordon got the impression that some of his mother's worst traits must have been seeded in those long ago days: her addiction to painkillers and Harlequin romance novels, her off-the-cuff blows to her son's self-esteem, her rage when denied the finer things in life, her unspoken envy of elegance. On one point Cynthia Swannson was perfectly clear:

She hadn't found poverty ennobling.

Gordon resolved that if he ever came into a fortune of his own he would spend it. It seemed the wisest course, not only for his sake, but for the sake of future generations as well. Which is why, after he stole a hatchet from his father's hardware store (following his conversation about barbecued dog ribs with Johnny), he felt very little guilt. It almost didn't feel like stealing at all. More like a smallish advance against his inheritance, was how he thought of it.

Now Gordon only needs one more thing to become a member of Jimmy's Tree House Order: the hangman's noose from a dead man's garage. Gordon has no idea where to begin looking for such a rare and dreadful talisman, but Jimmy, as promised, knows just the place: Old Man Jensen's garage. Supposedly, the mean old bastard hung himself in there only a few weeks ago.

Lucky for Gordon!

Every small town has an Old Man Jensen, a neighborhood crank who hates kids and foreigners and is always threatening to call the cops. A smelly, half-crazy old coot most often found pointing his big-knuckled finger at young mothers in the post office and saying, "Those noisy brats of yours will be the ruin of this world!" Tan polyester slacks belted just below the armpits, a ferocious stare from under wildly askew, overgrown eyebrows, a nose like the pimpled hide of a strawberry—and often just as red—*that* was what Gordon remembered about Old Man Jensen. And yelling—lots of yelling with old-fashioned cuss words. The alley behind Old Man Jensen's house was not a good place to ride a bike or play Kick the Can with your friends.

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That alley is where Old Man Jensen's garage sits. It's a broken-roofed converted shed covered with spidery dead vines and peeling paint recently pelted with dirt clods. Three small rectangular windows run horizontally across the garage door near the top. Gordon has to stand on tiptoe to peer through them. They're hazy with filth and it's hard to see anything at first, but as Gordon's eyes adjust to the dimness, he begins to make out a tool box, fishing rods, sacks of fertilizer, paint cans, pruning shears, string-bound stacks of old *National Geographic*; and right in the center of it all, a partially-assembled Model T. Far above the Model T's rear fender, Gordon sees a hangman's noose dangling from the rafters, just where Jimmy had said it would be. There must be an open window somewhere letting in a breeze, because the noose is swaying in a spooky way.

Gordon goes around to the side of the garage and finds the open window, pushes it open wider, and climbs on through. He steps down onto what he thinks is an antique car seat, but in actuality it's a gunnysack spread across a stack of glass milk bottles. The bottles go clattering across the cement floor, making Gordon clench his teeth in fright. But if the old man is really dead, he tells himself, there's no one around to hear him. Scared but determined, Gordon climbs on top of the Model T's fender. The noose is just out of reach. He's about to go grab a rake to fish it down when suddenly the garage's back door jerks open with a burst of dazzling light.

"What in the Sam-hell are *you* doin' in here?" Old Man Jensen shouts, alive as ever. He storms in like some angry, Old Testament prophet. Without even thinking, Gordon launches himself off the fender, snatching the noose from the rafters in mid-flight. He darts along the side of the Model T with Old Man Jensen lurching after him, his bony old hands crabbed and swatting, but catching only air. Gordon pivots past the headlights, clambers over a wooden box full of gear parts, pivots again, and then he's running along the opposite side of the car and out the open garage door. When he hits the alley, still accelerating, he holds up the hangman's noose like a trophy above his shining blonde head. He hears Old Man Jensen yelling after him: "Come back here, you sticky-fingered little whelp! You bastard son of a whore!" But Gordon is long gone by then.

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Not much later, panting like a dog, Gordon climbs the rope ladder to Jimmy's tree house. The hangman's noose is draped across his shoulders, the Troll Doll secured in his front pocket, and the hatchet swings from a loop in his belt. At last, Gordon has all the bounty that will guarantee him admittance to the fabulous Tree House Order of Jacques de Molay. He's in awe of his own cunning and bravery. He imagines Jimmy will be, too. He envisions Jimmy asking him to become his blood brother, in addition to making him Vice President of the Tree House Order—or Secretary-Treasurer, at the very least.

Clutching like a monkey at the top of the rope ladder, Gordon knocks on the trapdoor so Jimmy will know he's there. The trapdoor opens only a crack and Jimmy's hand appears, grasping. Gordon says, "Let me in." Jimmy says, "Give me the stuff first." Gordon is getting a feeling of vertigo. He's way up high, and he can't go for much longer supporting the full weight of his body with just one hand and his clenched knees. He hands up the noose, the doll, and the hatchet as quickly as he can.

"Now can I come in?" he asks.

Jimmy answers by dropping the noose over Gordon's head and hacking through the rope ladder with the hatchet, sending Gordon tumbling back to earth. The noose slips from Jimmy's hands, so Gordon's neck is spared from being broken, as intended, but it's still a long way down.

What he'll remember most is the rush of the wind in his ears. And then a sudden silence and the smell of risen dirt.

Picture seven-year-old Gordon Swannson sprawled on a square of grass framed in the trapdoor of a tree house: a mangled pink bug in a Hang Ten T-shirt, a tiny study in pain. The sum of his existence now includes a broken arm, a splintered leg, three cracked ribs, and a gash along the back of his skull that will require sixty-two stitches. It will be a while before the ambulance gets there, so Gordon has plenty of time to think. He decides he won't be friends with Jimmy again until at least the seventh grade.



BOOK ONE

*Pubescent Sex
and its Discontents*

*GRANT ME CHASTITY AND CONTINENCE, BUT NOT YET.
—AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO*

The Pocket BOOK of BONERS

AN OMNIBUS OF SCHOOL BOY HOWLERS
AND UNCONSCIOUS HUMOR



ses
the
SEUSS

dition

BONERS

For a while now, Cynthia has been noticing a whitish film of soap scum building up on the walls of Gordon's shower stall. No matter how often she scrubs, it's always there the next day, or the day after. Gordon showers before bedtime and she's checked—no soap scum before the shower, but dribs and drabs of it afterwards. It's driving her nuts. She can only conclude that Gordon is hostile toward sparkling tile surfaces. He must be doing it on purpose. Then one day it occurs to Cynthia:

It's not soap scum.

She's in Gordon's bedroom, changing the sheets, when it finally clicks. She's looking at the books on Gordon's nightstand, wondering if they're responsible for the sullen, churlish twelve-year-old he's become. He's always been an avid reader—he was reading before he could walk, practically—but the titles he's been bringing home lately suggest a disturbed state of mind. *Nausea*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Stranger*. It's Gordon who's become the real stranger. He can't even say hello anymore without a snarl. And what's this, tucked away between the anthologies of Nietzsche and Artaud? *The Pocket Book of Boners*. Cynthia's seen enough of those, thanks to Mal, to know what *that* means. Suddenly, it all becomes clear. Every night, for God only knows how long now, her wheezing, fair-haired boy has been getting hard-ons in the shower and masturbating himself like a maniac. That's not soap scum on the walls in there—it's jism.

Ick!

From now on, Gordon will be responsible for cleaning the shower stall himself. If he doesn't do a good enough job, she'll have to bring up this masturbation business and embarrass him with it. She's not

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going to risk getting her son's semen on her hands. How disgusting would that be? More disgusting, possibly, than the thoughts in his filthy little Boner book. She picks up *The Pocket Book of Boners* and scans a page at random:

"The Great Flood was sent because of the large numbers of dirty people."

Oh. It's not what she thought at all. She should have read the subtitle: *An Omnibus of School Boy Howlers and Unconscious Humor*. It's illustrated by Dr. Seuss, one of Gordon's heroes. Dr. Seuss' *McElligot's Pool* was the first book Gordon checked out of the town library—when he was still in diapers. Cynthia had thought it was just because he liked the pictures of all the weird fish, but he actually taught himself to read with that book. "If I wait long enough, if I'm patient and cool, who knows *what* I'll catch in McElligot's Pool!" God, she'd had to listen to that sentence about fifty million times, until it was fried onto a chunk of her brain, never to be forgotten. And now Gordon is writing his own book. He thinks it's a secret, but Cynthia knows all about it. She's seen him working on it, knows he keeps it in the locked bottom drawer of his desk, to which she has a spare key. She's even read some of it. She's not a literary critic, but in her opinion Gordon's current reading material is having far more of an influence, to his detriment, than good old Dr. Seuss. The title page has a crude illustration of a pathetic little bald guy howling with his eyes ripped out of their sockets. *Blind and Hairless*—that's what he's calling it. A novel. The first page reads:

I am a sick man. A wounded man. A man whose soul has been used as Kleenex by some snotty cosmic nose. It is very likely I am mentally deranged. However, seeing a psychiatrist is out of the question. Not that I'm superstitious or afraid of being labeled an emotional weakling. On the contrary, I was once a psychiatrist myself. Let's just say my faith in the profession has been shaken, partly because I was allowed to be a member of it.

I have taken to wearing a trench coat and dark glasses. My face is unshaven and smells of gin and cheap suntan oil. I keep my hands busy by making origami penguins out of gum wrappers. I give them to small children I pass on the street. Some turn and

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run. Others stand gawking at me with that mixture of wonder and horror usually reserved for circus freaks.

"Someday your dreams will be shattered, too," I tell them. The gawking ones cock their heads at this, seeming to digest the information. Then they invariably ask, "Where'd you get that hat, Mister?"

I am not wearing a hat. There is an explanation: I haven't washed my hair in over three months—but I don't tell them that....

Twelve years old and he's already pretending to be an old bum—and crazy to boot. Maybe he should get out and exercise more. *And stop jacking off!*

It's bad enough that Mal does it all the time (she pretends not to know)—but now Gordon too? There's too much testosterone flying around in the Swannson household. Something has to be done.

That night, as they're getting ready for bed, Cynthia has a little talk with Mal. She tells him about Gordon's secret shower activity and asks him what they should do about it. Mal shrugs his big shoulders and says, "So what's the big deal? He's twelve years old, for chrissakes. Whacking off is natural at his age. Let him live a little."

"He's in there ruining the shower walls, night after night," Cynthia complains. "We'll have to put in new tiles if he keeps it up."

Mal puts on his bathrobe, covering a huge patch of albino skin that looks like the state of Texas, right in the center of his back. "Didn't you ever diddle yourself at that age?" He wags his enormous, flaccid penis at her. It looks a venomous Mexican Gila Monster crouching in the tumbledown chaparral of his crotch.

Cynthia slaps him on the shoulder, harder than she'd really meant to. "No," she says, "I didn't diddle. I was afraid I'd burn in hell." She doesn't need to remind Mal that her parents were missionaries.

"Well, I did, all the time," Mal says. He almost sounds proud.

Cynthia resists the impulse to say, "You still do." The phrase, *Like father, like son*, races through her mind. Mal doesn't have a closet full of *Playboys*, *Penthouses*, and *Hustlers* because he likes to read the articles. *What does he think, she's dumb?* Cynthia tries to remember which came first: did he start bringing home the skin magazines after she lost

interest in having sex with him, or did she lose interest in having sex with him because he brought home the skin magazines? It's kind of a chicken-or-the-egg scenario. Either way, there's no going back.

They both hear Gordon starting his nightly shower down the hall.

"I want you to talk to him," Cynthia says.

"There's no way I'm telling him he'll burn in hell for yanking his crank."

"I'm not asking you to. I just want you to tell him to not be so blatant about it."

"It's not like the neighbors know. He hasn't taken out ads in the dang newspaper."

"You know what I mean. I don't want to be the one who's always cleaning up—" she wrinkles her nose and lowers her voice to a whisper "*—his sperm.*"

At that point they hear a suspicious rustling behind the closed door of their own bathroom.

Mal and Cynthia's bathroom is connected to Gordon's bathroom by way of the tub room, which sits in the middle. Mal has a stash of his very smuttiest magazines in there, in a small cupboard within easy reach of the toilet, for those days when his bowel movements are coming a little slow. From the sound of it, Gordon has discovered his own uses for Mal's hidden treasure trove of porn.

"What's he doing in our bathroom?" Cynthia whispers.

Mal knows damn well what Gordon is doing in their bathroom, but he's hoping Cynthia will remain ignorant.

"Maybe this would be a good time to go talk to him," she says.

Mal feigns lethargy.

"*Now...*" Cynthia prods him.

With heavy feet, Mal heads toward the bathroom. He clears his throat, hoping to make enough noise to roust Gordon out of there.

When he opens the door a crack, he sees Gordon standing stark naked near the open cupboard with his hairless little dink sticking straight out from his body like a divining rod. It's so stiff that it seems to be vibrating. Gordon's nose is mere inches away from a neatly trimmed twat toward the bottom of a *Hustler* centerfold. Mal notes, with some amusement, that it's the Scratch-'N'-Sniff issue (which to

his nose smelled like perfumed bacon). Without really thinking, he startles Gordon by saying:

“Hey there! What’s wrong with your tool?”

Panicked, Gordon drops the magazine and makes a jackrabbit dash for the privacy of his own bathroom. He trips on the rug in the tub room, staggers off-kilter, and smacks his head (*hard*) on the far wall. Momentum carries him into his own bathroom, where he does a woozy about-face—flagpole still waving—and locks the door behind him.

That kid’s gonna have one helluva bruise, Mal muses to himself. Maybe flailing the lizard is more dangerous than he’d thought.



When Mal returns to bed, he tells Cynthia—with facial expressions both comic and woebegone—about the events that just transpired.

So Mister Teenage Cool got caught stroking his boner! Cynthia has never laughed so hard at anything in all her life. She knows she should try to sympathize with the little jerk-off artist (hormones are no doubt coursing through his bloodstream like rocket fuel), but there’s something spiteful in Cynthia that makes her laugh even more. Gordon tries so hard to be aloof—like he’s too smart for her, too *with it*—and it just tickles her to no end to see him get caught with his pants down. Or, in this case, with his pants all the way off.

Doesn’t every mother harbor a secret hatred toward her son when he starts to drift away from her?

With Gordon, it happened early. When he was helpless, just a baby, her love for him reared up unbidden—all ferocious instinct. She gave birth to him when she was still young, only nineteen. No one had warned her that a mother’s love could reveal itself in such a howling, half-mad way. There was no tenderness in it, no real concern for Gordon as another human being. She just loved him because he was *hers*, while at the same time she resented him, because he curtailed other possibilities for her future. She could have gone to college, could have had a career (the alternative lives she imagined for herself were invariably fabulous and carefree), but raising Gordon was too

distracting. He was always burping, always crying, always filling his Pampers with stewed beets. She was fiercely protective of him, but there were times when she wanted to murder him. If he had fallen off a pier into shark-infested waters, she would have jumped right in to save him, without even thinking—but as the shark fins drew near she might have found herself muttering: “I should have let you drown, you goddam little *freak*.”

Cynthia was surprised by her own ambivalent nature. By the time Gordon turned four or five, the balance of her sentiments had shifted. Resentment was winning out over her primitive maternal affection—because he truly *was* a freak, an aberration. No child should be capable of reading what he was reading at that age. And what a smartmouth! Always sassing her, always asking, *Why?* So she started slapping him. He talked like an adult—he could start acting like one.

By then, if Gordon had fallen off a pier, she would have just leaned over the railing and shouted, “Try heading for shore, Mister Big Britches! I guess you shouldn’t have gone near the water until you learned how to swim.”

Of course from that point things only went from bad to worse. Gordon withdrew from her and—*let’s face it*—started to fear her. Which made her despise him even more. What son would have the gall not to love his mother? She’d show *him*, that ungrateful little twerp. Reading was all he seemed to care about, so that’s where she went after him. Whenever she saw him with a book in his hand, she’d find some meaningless chore for him to do. Dust the television, rake the walnut leaves, de-flea the basset hound, remake the beds—it didn’t matter, so long as it kept him busy. Gordon did his best to ignore her. She called him Lazybones, said he could either do his chores or start paying for room and board. For the most part, he did as he was told. But lately, more and more, he just scowls at her and turns up the stereo—

—*which makes her so mad she could claw his face off.*

In fact, she’s tried it a number of times, but he’s big enough now to stop her. So she tells Mal to beat him with the belt they keep up in the kitchen cupboard—which Mal does, reluctantly, when he gets home. Lately Mal’s been complaining that it upsets his evenings. He’s told her to just beat Gordon in the daytime, when the offense (“Whatever the stupid thing was...”) is still fresh in her mind. But

Cynthia doesn't want to be the only parent who metes out discipline. Gordon will grow up thinking she's an angry shrew, a backbiting harpy, when really, she's just trying to keep him under control.

Tonight she's feeling a bit closer to Mal than usual. It's almost as if they share a common enemy—*Gordon*. She rolls on her side under the sheets and puts a hand on Mal's splotchy, slightly damp chest. She caresses the sparse brown hairs there, thinking about the days when she and Mal first met. He'd seemed so charismatic back then. She was the new girl in town, the daughter of missionaries (her father had just been appointed minister of the Kingsburg United Methodist Church). Mal was the local rich kid. He was in his second year at Reedley Community College, studying architecture. She was a senior in high school. She was beautiful in those days—almost movie star beautiful—a blonde with big green eyes, Marilyn Monroe lips, and full, perky breasts.

Mal saw her in his father's hardware store one day and claims he was instantly smitten. He certainly gave her a lot of attention, inviting her out to football games and to parties with his friends. He seemed to know everyone and she had to admit it made her feel glamorous, zooming around in Mal's speedboat and his cherry-red Corvette. Mal had big plans. He was always going somewhere fast, with the wind blowing through his already thinning hair. She found she liked all that high-flown energy. And even more, she liked that Mal made her parents crazy. "He's an atheist," they said. "A materialist. All he cares about is money." She actually thought those were some of Mal's finer traits. Soon, they were going steady.

She gave herself to him for the first time on prom night, in the backseat of Mal's new airplane. Nineteen years old and he was already a full-fledged pilot, instrument-rated. His father, Milt, had rewarded Mal for that accomplishment by buying him the Cessna. It was a full moon night when Mal drove her out to the airport, the sky still a dazzling peacock blue down along the horizon. He told her they would make a grand entrance at the prom later, but first, he had a surprise for her.

She didn't know what to expect as she sat there in the Corvette watching Mal push open the heavy doors to Hangar Number 5. Was he just going to show it to her, or did he actually expect her to go for a

ride with him? She'd never flown in a small plane before, and she certainly didn't think it was safe to do so at night. The Cessna, in its dark cave, reminded her of the pterodactyls she'd seen in one of those hokey old dinosaur movies—*Journey to the Center of the Earth*, or *King Kong* maybe. She didn't want to have anything to do with it. But Mal had already run through the pre-flight check and was motioning for her to climb into the cockpit, so he could start the prop. She didn't want him to know she was scared of flying with him, so she climbed into the co-pilot's seat, found the safety belts, and strapped herself in tight.

The plane started up with a shuddering roar. *My god, it was noisy!* It seemed even noisier because the night had been so quiet just moments before (tree frogs chirping down near the pond skirting the airport; a freight train rumbling in the distance, blowing its mournful horn). Now the Cessna's engine was shattering the peace in a way that almost seemed obscene—and certainly should have been illegal. She started to get a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as Mal taxied toward the runway. She wondered, *Does he really know how to fly this thing, or is he just showing off?*

The runway lights—blue and amber—formed two parallel lines that seemed to converge in the distance as Mal positioned the plane at the start of the airstrip. He revved the Cessna's engine like a drag racer and then they were off. Cynthia clenched the door handle in her fist. The whole airplane felt as flimsy as a kite, and it was gathering speed at a terrifying rate. She was sure it would shake apart before they got to the end of the runway. But instead they zoomed up, up, and away. She felt an electric jangling in the soles of her feet, spasms of weakness in her knees and legs. A sudden vertigo overtook her as the airplane climbed into the night.

Oh my God, she thought, how will we ever get back down?

Mal looked at her and yelled something like, "Isn't this great?" She gave him a curt nod. Saliva was flooding her mouth and she was afraid that if she answered him she would vomit. They were already so high above everything. What if the engine stopped? What if they ran out of gas, or some crucial part fell off? They'd be killed for certain. Her parents had an old Buick V-8 that had a habit of quitting and leaving them stranded by the side of the road. Why should an airplane

be any different—especially a chintzy one like this, so cheap-looking compared to the jets at real airports? Why would anyone take such risks? She decided, then and there, that Mal must be insane.

That last thought was confirmed when Mal yelled: “Let’s go crash the prom! Want to?”

For a moment she thought Mal intended to crash the Cessna into her high school prom as an act of pure terrorism, some sort of kamikaze stunt provoked by morbid teen feelings. Then she realized he was using the word “crash” in its slangy sense, as in, “to intrude on a party without being invited.” But by then it was too late and she’d already had a vision of youthful carnage on a massive scale: bloody rented tuxes, limbless torsos in gaudy crinoline and satin, decapitated heads in the spiked punchbowl....

Mal tilted the Cessna’s wings at a sickening angle, making her feel like she might tumble right out of her seat and go swooning into the black sky outside the flimsy door. He pointed his finger down at the lights in her earthward-leaning side window and told her Kingsburg was directly below them. She never would have recognized it on her own. Black expanses of farmland were broken up by tiny glowing arteries of freeways and yellow pinpricked clusters that were supposed to be streetlights in a small town. It all looked alien and menacing. They started to descend, following a silvery trail through the shadowed landscape—moonlight reflecting on the Kings River. Soon they were low enough that she could make out the trees crowding the river’s banks. The prom was taking place at the locally-famous Kings River Gun Club, a white-painted cinderblock building with tall windows facing the river, where members brought their families to enjoy barbecues, skeet-shooting, water-skiing, and general redneck fun. Cynthia saw lights up ahead and knew it was the Gun Club even before Mal put the plane into a dive and shouted, “We’re gonna buzz those suckers! Here we go, baby! Hang on!”

Mal let out a banshee whoop as the Cessna practically skimmed along the river right in front of the lit-up Gun Club building. Cynthia could see the faces inside turning to look out the windows. *These are my last moments on earth*, she thought. She hoped no one could see the tight-lipped grimace of pure terror on her face. She had unconsciously placed her hand on Mal’s thigh and now she had a viselike grip on his

leg. *We're going to crash* was all she could think. When a bridge suddenly loomed up in front of the Cessna's windshield, she started to scream.

Then, in an instant, they were heading back up toward the stars again. Mal had pulled back on the little steering wheel that stuck straight out from the dashboard and now they were rising in a steep climb. She let go of Mal's leg and put her hand on her throat to check her pulse. It was racing so fast that she couldn't count the individual beats. Up and up they went, higher than they'd ever gone before. They passed through a low drifting cloudbank and everything above and below them was obscured in swirling gray fog. *What if we run into something in here?* Cynthia thought. *A bird, a mountain, another plane?* She felt like she was suffocating. After several long minutes they were above it, out in the open, and for the first time she was struck by how beautiful flying at night could be. Just beneath them the cloudbank was all lit up, seemingly from within, like a river of ghostly sheep. The stars were so much brighter up there, brighter than she'd ever seen them. The clouds were all below them now. It was clear viewing into deepest space in every direction she could see. They were at 10,000 feet and still climbing.

The Cessna's engine seemed quieter up in that thin air. Cynthia began to calm down. In fact, she started feeling cheerful, almost giddy. Mal pointed toward the horizon out her side window. "Look! Those are noctilucent clouds!" he shouted. "You'll never see them from the ground! They're actually ice-coated extraterrestrial dust particles!" Cynthia followed where Mal's finger was pointing. She saw a shimmering, milky-white band crossing the midnight sky with a touch of gold along its bottom edges. It made her think of a translucent membrane unfurled from some gigantic luminous jellyfish dwelling in the sea's darkest depths. As she watched, the clouds gradually faded and dissolved into ethereal mist. It was one of the most gorgeous things she'd ever seen.

Cynthia put her hand on Mal's big arm and gave him a caress. "I love it up here!" she said—and to her own surprise she meant it. She was feeling euphoric, in love with the whole world all at once. Mal responded to her good mood by becoming loquacious. He jokingly proposed marriage and offered to make her a member of the Mile-High Club (she refused to unzip his pants and suck him off—as he

was hoping—but to show what a good sport she was, she playfully patted his crotch). He flattered her by telling her she could become a model or an actress. He wasn't kidding about that marriage business, either, he decided. He spent quite some time telling her how he'd make a fine provider.

Then Mal drifted onto other topics. He kept up a steady stream of patter that sounded increasingly deranged. He told her that aliens really *did* crash their spaceship in Roswell, New Mexico. They were carrying plans for an anti-gravitation device along with a sort of vacuum cleaner that could suck up all the bad feelings of the human race. He claimed he was a reincarnated Chinaman, a samurai warrior with a bad prostate whose likeness was carved in life-sized terra cotta and buried on the outskirts of Xi'an in the tomb of the Emperor Qin Shihuang. He explained to her that a secret cult of bankers, media barons, and lumber merchants ruled the world. They practiced the black arts and brainwashed their own children into becoming psychics and assassins. The Rothschilds and the Vanderbilts were tied up in it somehow, but he couldn't say more. Not that she wanted him to, anyway. By then she was off in her own little world, singing Barbra Streisand tunes.

"People who need people are the luckiest people in the world..." Etc.

It was only later that Cynthia found out she and Mal had been suffering from high-altitude sickness—the lack of oxygen up there was making them both a little crazy. They were traveling at 15,000 feet above sea level. They could have passed out from hypoxia and died before they even hit the ground.

Fortunately, just as Mal was explaining the several strange coincidences between John F. Kennedy's assassination and Lincoln's ("And don't you go believing that Lone Gunman Theory for a second..."), he leaned forward on the Cessna's steering wheel and the plane began a descent toward lower altitudes.

By that time, Cynthia was in a giddy stupor, but Mal still had enough of his wits left about him to find the Selma airport and land the plane with hardly a bounce. Once they had taxied off the runway and pulled to a stop near the Corvette still parked in front of the hangar, Cynthia felt such an outpouring of pure, naked lust for Mal—induced by his piloting prowess (*"My hero!"*)—that instead of getting

out of the plane, she climbed into the backseat and beckoned Mal to follow her.

It was there that Cynthia allowed Mal deflower her, right on the ox-blood vinyl seats with their invigorating stench of new plastic. She was still feeling the symptoms—akin to drunkenness—of hypoxia, and she'd never felt so horny in her entire life. She was somewhat taken aback to discover that Mal had condoms in the Cessna's glovebox—as if he'd been expecting that sort of reaction from her all along—but she decided not to make a fuss. After some serious French kissing and the liberation of her breasts from the prison of her underwire bra (nipples erect like tiny pink top hats), she helped Mal unbuckle his pants. She was taken aback a second time when she saw the length and girth of his member. It was as thick as a Campbell's soup can and nearly twice as long. *There's no way I'll ever fit that monster inside me*, she thought, but then she decided to give it a shot. She was big and rubbery down there, after all (she'd once shoehorned a travel-sized bottle of Johnson's Baby Shampoo in there, as an experiment, and there had been follow-up experiments with a medium-sized zucchini, a Heinz ketchup bottle, and a wriggling, duct taped live squirrel as well...). Mal girded himself with two 'Trojans and lay sideways on the backseat as she lowered herself on top of him. It was an uncomfortable fit, but she was dripping with her own lubrication, and after a little gentle rocking she had him buried in her to the hilt.

"Wow, this is *swell!*" said Mal.

"*Sock it to me, Big Boy!*" she cried, heaving up and down on her lewd haunches. "*Put the wood to me, Mal! Fuck me silly!*"

Okay, so those probably weren't the exact words, thinks Cynthia, still on her side in bed. That first time in the cockpit with Mal remained, however, the sexual high point of her life. Just thinking about it again has made her wet. She'd climaxed at least half a dozen times in that crappy little airplane (the condoms broke, or just plain disintegrated from all the heat and friction. A similar condom mishap resulted in Gordon's conception a few months later, to their mutual chagrin). She's never had multiple orgasms like that since. There must have been more to it than just Mal's big dingus, which, frankly, can sometimes be a chore (if she's not extremely well-lubricated—or high on painkillers—it can hurt like hell). Maybe it was the hypoxia that made

everything feel so sexy. Now kissing Mal has all the appeal of licking the inside of the butcher's paper off an old, raw steak. And every time she lets him do it to her, she stays outside the experience, watching without passion as he moans and groans to his own private pornography—slamming away at her like industrial machinery made flesh.

Oh, what the heck.... Life has other consolations besides orgasms—although at the moment she can't think of any. *Children?* No way. *Married life?* Not by a long shot. *Her own credit cards?* Well, *maybe....*

"Are you up for a little action tonight?" murmurs Mal, surprising her with a finger sliding deep into the slick of her vagina. His big knuckle glides in so effortlessly that it feels as if its been soaped.

"I guess we could try," Cynthia says demurely.

"It doesn't feel like we'll be needing the K-Y this time..." says Mal, rolling over toward her. For the past several years, bored with foreplay, Cynthia has found that the only way she can get her husband's monster dong inside her is to slather it with K-Y Jelly first. They've gone through buckets of the slimy stuff. She'd been thinking it had turned her off to sex permanently—but tonight things seem different.

Mal's erection thuds against Cynthia's thigh, as thick and solid as a banister. "Come to mama, you big bad brute," she says, grabbing him by the throat.



After the hot water finally runs out, Gordon towels off from his evening shower. He's still smarting from the bump on his head and the bruise to his ego incurred when his father caught him with Miss Scratch-'N'-Sniff (suntan lotion mixed up with old cat food was what it smelled like to him, with maybe a hint of homemade ice cream). He hopes he can skulk off to bed without a lecture—although he can't imagine his mother passing up *that* opportunity. Nothing seems to please her more these days than telling him how he's going to end up a failure. Now she can get even more specific: "Not only will you fail at everything, but you'll be a *blind* failure with *hairy* palms!"

Just what he doesn't need....

So Gordon tiptoes out into the hallway with a towel around his waist, hoping to avoid detection on the path back to his bedroom. He's about to turn the corner when he hears someone moaning. It sounds like a cow, if cows could say, "*Oh, help me....*" He immediately thinks back to the Hoo-Hoo Club initiation some six years ago and wonders if his father has been wounded again. He turns the corner and looks down the darkened hallway toward the open door to his parent's bedroom.

Nope. No one sprawling drunk and bitten. No torn, bloody underpants recently employed as a cape for an overly confident matador. What Gordon sees instead—in a double image (once on the lamp-lit bed, then reflected again in the gold-veined mirror tiles covering the back wall)—is a scene much more familiar, unwittingly encountered time and again throughout the years of his childhood. His mother's bare legs are splayed as if in invisible stirrups and his father's pale, hairy rump is pumping away between them with wild-assed violence. When he was much younger, Gordon used to be terrified by seeing Mal and Cynthia go at each other like that. Now, of course, he knows they're just fucking. Conceiving Derek, his soon-to-be brother.

A VIEW FROM THE WOMB

The English novelist Samuel Butler once remarked that the question, “Is life worth living?” is a question for an embryo, not for a man. The Budding Hermit embryo would heartily agree. Why, indeed, should one leave the womb? Why submit to the degradation of diapers, pacifiers, vomity blankets, and fireproof pajamas with little yellow ducky heads on the collars? Can any earthly reward be worth all the trouble? The answer, of course, is *No*. A Budding Hermit always makes the decision to stay put. He crosses his embryonic arms, thinking, ‘There’s still plenty of room for growth in here. I’ll just push this spleen to one side and shoot straight up the middle.’

Imagine the Budding Hermit’s chagrin when he’s yanked out by the ankles through a Caesarian section.

—Crash Gordon, *The Sensuous Hermit* (1987)

That’s totally true, that stuff about not wanting to leave the womb. I mean, it’s so awesome in there, just hanging out, with nothing to do but kick back while your little cells run through the whole history of evolution. First you’re a zygote, then you’re some kind of thumb-sucking tadpole (with gills!), pretty soon you’ve got yourself a reptilian brain (Feed me! Fight me! Fuck me!) layered over with a mammalian brain (Hey! I can grow hair!), which is finally topped off with whatever gives us a specifically human brain (mostly junk). To be honest, sometimes I wish I could stop the whole process while I was still just a bug’s arm or a rat’s liver. I’m like the Budding Hermit that way. There are times when becoming a man hardly seems worth it.

Another great thing about being in the womb is that you remember everything. Or at least I do. I remember life on the Other Side, and how cool it is there. No hassles whatsoever. Actually, everything is way too easy. You want to live in a palace on a mountaintop? Fine—just think it and you’re there. Want to try dating a mermaid? Suddenly, a mermaid shows up on your couch, and you can just hug and hug that fishy babe for aeons, if that’s

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how you want to spend eternity. But there's no sex. I mean, there are things that are like a million times better than sex—stuff that makes a blowjob look like a steaming dog turd with wings on it, practically—but I missed sex, anyway. I guess I missed the grunginess of it. I'm the kind of guy who likes to get down and dirty. So when the time came for me to incarnate in an earthly body again, I was ready. Usually entities on the Other Side are shitting their pants about going another round in a human suit. (Not that anyone over there actually has an asshole. Or pants, even.) They look at being born in the same way that we look at death over here. But for me, it's just like a trip to Disneyland—kind of corny and weird, but fun. Hell, I've already done it about a kajillion times, anyway. What's the worst thing that could happen? I die? Oh, like that hasn't happened before.... Big deal.

So here I am. Derek Calvin Swannson, Embryo, safe and sound inside my designated womb for now, but knowing that a shitstorm of trouble is headed my way just as soon as I bail out of the birth canal (again). Inter Urinas Et Faeces Nascimur—"We are born between piss and shit." Freud was always bringing that up. And it will be a shitstorm, believe me. I picked a very bad start for myself in life this time. An angry, pill-popping mom, a dad who's not going to be around, a hick town to grow up in. It all sucks the big one. The only reason I did it was for the sake of my pal, Gordon.

We've been brothers before, Gordon and me. More than once, actually. We're like a tag team. The last time was on a farm in late-19th-century France. I was the good brother who stayed at home and grew hay and milked cows, while Gordon ran off to Paris to get loaded on absinthe and spend all his money on hookers. Cute hookers, too. Some of them were flat-out gorgeous. He made drawings of them, which he sent to me in letters. He thought he was an artist. Gordon ended up having a much better time than I did in that last life, even though it was short. (He died at 33, broke and alone on a bench in a public park. Asthma attack. I died at 58 after eating some bad cheese, which was just way too typical.) But this time around the tables are turned and it's me that'll be getting drunk and fucked. Whoo-hoo! I can't wait to grow up!

Gordon has incarnated even more times than I have, so he really knows the ropes. I think he might've even squeezed in another incarnation somewhere between his asthma attack and my stinky cheese episode (I almost farted myself senseless before I finally croaked). But if Gordon had another

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life, I should've heard about it. On the Other Side I was supposed to be all-knowing—or at least that's what I thought.

The big attraction with Gordon—and the reason I'm tagging along with him on what is bound to be yet another crappy human adventure—is that he has a powerful daimon looking out for him. One of the very top guys. If you've never heard of them, daimons aren't demons or devils—let's get that straight right off. A daimon is sort of a spiritual mentor, a guide from the Other Side, who is there with you from birth onward to coax and shape your soul during your earthly life.

They're invisible, of course. And they don't always tell you what you want to hear. But believe me, having a daimon is a really big deal. It means you're on the path to someplace better. As in closer to God, if you get my drift. Provided you don't screw up.

Socrates had one. Just about every famous or near-famous person throughout human history had one (whether they knew it or not). But otherwise daimons are pretty rare. Most people just end up with run-of-the-mill guardian angels—other spirits who protect and watch out for them. Guardian angels would be like your dead grandmother, your dead second cousin, your dead Aunt Judy... and like most of your living relatives, they're pretty useless. They're always bitching about something. They can be petty and judgmental. And they're so touchy that in most cases it's not even worth trying to be friends with them. But occasionally one of them will get their act together long enough to find you a job or pull you out of the way of a speeding bus. And the especially nice ones can make you feel like you're on a winning streak (sometimes they'll even give you good stock tips, or pick winning lottery numbers). But on the whole, a daimon is a much better entity to have watching your back. What's cool about daimons is that they'll make your life a lot more interesting. Without one, you're likely to end up as dull-normal: a polyester-clad realtor, an old church lady, a paunchy Rotarian. You won't find lasting fame with that kind of destiny unless someone like T.S. Eliot decides to write a poem about you. But with a daimon, anything's possible. You could wind up being President.

The downside to daimons is that they have absolutely no pity, and they'll put you through all kinds of hell if they think that in the long run it'll be good for you. A daimon will land your sorry ass in bed with a life-threatening illness just to give you more than the usual exposure to ideas about religion, or the arts and literature. For instance, look at what happened to Gordon,

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always wheezing and getting his legs broken by his pals. You think that Easter Bunny ass-kicking was an accident? That was just his daimon's way of giving him a unique perspective on life. A way of saying, "Christ may have been resurrected on this day, but Easter was originally a day for pagan celebration and there's more to it than cute little bunnies. So you're going down, Junior. Look deeper." Humans are easily distracted, and a daimon has a much easier time communicating with them when they're sick or dreaming. Meditation also works. In fact, if Gordon would sit down and learn to meditate the right way, he might stop getting his ass kicked.

Another thing that daimons love to do is hand you a crummy childhood in a nowhere little town with lousy parents. The theory here is that you'll try harder to make something of yourself because you're so desperate to get away from it all. Which, of course, explains the whole Mal and Cynthia Show in Kingsburg. I can't believe I signed on for that. I only did it because Gordon's daimon promised to look after me a little, too, if I said I'd be Gordon's brother for this particular ride on the Earth merry-go-round. I've never had a daimon before—not even a part-time one—and like I said, Gordon's is one of the best. It's like having an Indy 500 racecar mechanic working on your engine, instead of trying to keep it running yourself. So I said, "Sure. Let's do it."

What it all comes down to is spiritual awareness, or the soul's progress. A daimon's awareness is so far beyond what any human being can conceive of that it can't even be communicated in words. A daimon works in images and events. Gordon—a fairly knowledgeable guy on the Other Side—has deliberately narrowed the focus of his awareness so he could inhabit a human body again. Don't ask me why. It has something to do with karma, I guess. As for me, I have a foot in both worlds—at least while I'm still in Cynthia's womb. I can remember the Other Side, where time doesn't exist, which allows my consciousness to skip around in earth-bound time. In other words, I can see Gordon's past and future (and my own) from this vantage point. I can even provide a running commentary, which I'll be doing from here on out.

I know this is all very confusing. If it's totally outside the scope of your own religious experience, you might try thinking about it in Christian terms. See if this helps: Not to be blasphemous or anything, but on a small scale you could think of Gordon's daimon as his spiritual Father. That makes Gordon the Son.

Consider me the Holy Ghost.

MORE BONERS

Sometime just after he turned twelve, Gordon began to suspect he was going insane with lustful thoughts.

It started out with an innocent crush on his seventh grade English teacher, Miss Saroyan—a dusky-eyed Armenian beauty, still in her twenties, whose face made Gordon think of Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. Miss Saroyan wore her long black hair back in a loose inky braid that went flicking behind her as she walked, like a devil’s tail or a snake beckoning. She liked to wear floor-length peasant skirts of such thin cotton that when she stood in the sunlight streaming in from the metal-framed classroom windows they became almost transparent. During such moments, Gordon experienced brain-fogging deliriums of lust. He imagined himself crawling beneath those illuminated tents of dusty rose and fern tendril green to nuzzle like a faun at the warm, fuzzy mound of Miss Saroyan’s womanhood. And the fantasy didn’t just end there. The best part was that Miss Saroyan would go on teaching, grinding out salient facts about Mark Twain and *Silas Marner* as Gordon knelt beneath her. Standing in front of her unsuspecting students she would writhe in private ecstasy—one implosive, silently shared climax after another—until Gordon’s tongue was awash in the peach-sweet proof of her longing for him. These visions gave Gordon such thudding erections that he often had to stay after class pretending to organize his notes until his hard-on would surrender.

Miss Saroyan happened to be the niece of the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, William Saroyan. Her required reading list included her uncle’s famous short story, “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze” and his best-selling book, *The Human Comedy*. Gordon read

both with a tingling of envy. It was obvious that Miss Saroyan thought of her uncle as a truly great man. More than anything, Gordon wanted Miss Saroyan to think of *him* as a great man, also. So he resolved to become an author.

Writing his first novel, *Blind and Hairless*, occupied Gordon for the better part of that school year. But with summer approaching, his attention started to wander. He spent more and more of his time sneaking peeks at his father's pornography collection.

In the beginning Gordon was only interested in the pictures, but in the long run the articles had the most impact on him. *Letters to Penthouse*, Xavier Hollander's *The Happy Hooker*, the hairier parts of Dr. Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*, and the stories published in *Cheri*, *Hustler*, *Gent*, and *Oui* described acts of perversion so outrageous that Gordon was at first shocked and then appalled by them. *Adults actually do that?!* His mind boggled. But later, after months of regular exposure to these graphic—and often grammatically-incorrect—tales of sexual anarchy ("I'm a sophomore at a small Midwestern college with a horse-sized penis..."), Gordon arrived at the mistaken conclusion that such deviant and venereally-reckless behavior was not only possible, but was actually happening all the time. *Everyone's doing it!* From that point, lewdness spread through his mind like a virus.

Soon he was imagining having sex with almost every woman he encountered. Old Mrs. Lundquist—with her big, leathery boobs and her hair like a lemonade-stained Lhasa apso—cheerfully begged him to sodomize her as she leaned over the soda fountain in her **Swedish Sweets Shoppe**. Gaunt Mrs. Appleton, the Fire Chief's wife, gave Gordon a porpoise-like blowjob in the deep end of the high school swimming pool; he couldn't help himself after he saw her in that black one-piece nylon bathing suit with her nipples poking out. All three of the check out clerks at **Ivan's Swedish Market** (even that mean one with the beet-colored beehive hair and the drawn-on eyebrows) flung off their cobalt blue smocks and laid down naked in the cereal aisle so Gordon could successively hump them while being watched over by Count Chocula, Cap'n Crunch, and that fey-looking leprechaun on the Lucky Charms box. Even Gordon's grandmother and his sexy first cousin, Hadleigh, grappled with him in an erotic shower scene. Gordon's libidinous imagination knew no bounds.

He became a master of jacking-off. He did it everywhere: in trees, irrigation ditches, abandoned forts, Sam's dog house, and late one night with the vacuum cleaner hose down at the Pink Elephant Car Wash (the best seventy-five cents he'd ever spent). He experimented with lubricants. In the bathroom he sampled soaps (Dial was good, Ivory even better, but Lava Hand Soap—with pumice—would never touch his foreskin again), shaving cream (Brut Cool Mint Gel was quite tingly), various shampoos and conditioners, his mother's Oil of Olay, and in a fit of sheer madness, Vick's VapoRub (*yowch!*). In the kitchen: butter, Cheez Whiz, sour cream (he could have made a tasty baked potato), Cool Whip, egg yolks, Aunt Jemima's Pure Maple Syrup (*sticky...*), and anchovy paste (more for its smell than its texture). In the garage: well... after an encounter with a can of Quaker State 30-weight motor oil he became convinced he had no business seeking his pleasure there.

With all this masturbatory activity, Gordon began to consider himself something of a sexual sophisticate, especially in relation to his peers. He literally thought about sex all the time, during almost every waking moment. He could muster up a mental image of almost every position in the *Kama Sutra*. He was able to define esoteric terms like masochism, cunnilingus, fellatio, frottage, and *ménage à trois*. But he still hadn't even come close to getting laid. Imagine his frustration. He had yet to see an actual nude woman in the flesh, aside from his own mother. And he had yet to sprout even his first pubic hair.

But all that was soon to change.



Ever since Gordon's mother found out she's pregnant again, she's been stamping around the house naked like some saggy-stomached Bantu fertility goddess. It's kind of gross. She's truly the only woman Gordon can't imagine screwing. He takes one look at her cellulite-rippled thighs and the bear brown fur curling up from her vagina, and he thinks, *How did I ever fit my damned head through there?*

She's usually dressed, thank God, by the time he gets home from the lumberyard in the evenings. His father has him working with the

air conditioning crew after school. He crawls through attics and under houses routing air ducts, braving black widow spiders and asbestos dust for fifty cents below the minimum wage. He keeps hoping some horny housewife will greet him at her door wearing a pair of black fishnet stockings and a sexy negligée. The ensuing seduction scene runs through his head at three times normal speed (she unfastens his manly tool belt, lowers the zipper on his pants with her teeth, etc.). So far it hasn't happened, but he's still optimistic.

With the money he sets aside from the job, he plans to buy a used Corvette when he turns sixteen. He knows there's something fundamentally ludicrous about owning such a car, and it will probably be an embarrassment to him by the time he's ready to leave home and become a beatnik (he's been reading a lot of Kerouac and Burroughs lately). However, his father owned a Corvette before him—so they'll have that in common—and Gordon is hoping it will help him meet girls. If a car really *is* a psychological extension of a man's genitals, as he's so often read, then his will be bulging, blue, and freaky-fast—with pinstripes that look like veins.

He's hoping that a driver's license will open up exciting new vistas for him. Lately, his days have a sameness that he finds a little disturbing. School, work, a quick yank in the shower, then it's time for bed. Whole weeks go by that way. It makes him want to say, "Oh, come on.... *That's it?*"

Today the monotony was broken up somewhat by an incident in journalism class. The class is taught by an affable, bearded, big-gutted man named Digger Olsen—a hippie who ate too much. He looks like a friendly bull walrus. He's known around campus as "The Big O." Gordon thinks he's the greatest. Jimmy Marrsden and Gordon are taking the class together, finally getting to know each other again after six years of deliberate avoidance. Gordon is the Opinions Editor of the school newspaper, *The Viking Voice*; Jimmy is one of its photographers and the main darkroom technician. Together, they've been raising a mild sort of hell with the school's administration—Jimmy taking bizarre photos of those in charge and Gordon writing subversive captions to go along with them. The other day, for example, a girl named Amanda Erickson was suspended from school for wearing a T-shirt that said, *Life is a bed of roses, but watch out for the pricks*. Jimmy took

a picture of Amanda (T-shirt slogan prominently displayed) as she was being strong-armed by the assistant vice-principal—a pop-eyed Young Republican/Moral Majority type named Donald Witzkowski who took his job far too seriously. In this particular photo, Mr. Witzkowski had the countenance, Gordon thought, of a maddened trout. He chose to run the photo on his Opinions page with a caption that read ***Sanctimonious Fishman Gropes One of Our Fair Students***, along with a fiery editorial denouncing the school's dress code policy. That Amanda was just one rung above trailer trash (and had nice tits) was not the issue; it was her right to free speech that concerned Gordon. If Amanda ended up wanting to date him after the article came out, well... that was just a bonus. When the article *did* come out (despite The Big O's serious misgivings), it caused an uproar: students organized into protest groups, staged rallies, and today they came to school wearing T-shirts with the filthiest slogans they could think of. Some of these amounted to no more than rude concert T-shirts (Ted Nugent, Molly Hatchet, and Blue Oyster Cult were especially popular), but others were genuinely creative and obscene. Gordon was called into the vice-principal's office during journalism class, where Donald Witzkowski met him along with a surprise guest: Sergeant Alphonse Garcia, of the Kingsburg Police Department.

The door closed behind them and Gordon was instructed to sit in a metal folding chair. As he sat "What's this?" Sergeant Garcia asked abruptly, flinging the latest issue of *The Viking Voice* in Gordon's face.

"That's a newspaper," Gordon said, stating the obvious. He let the loose pages fall at his feet.

"I know it's a newspaper! I'm talking about what you wrote in it, dum-dum!"

"You mean my editorial?" asked Gordon, who was thinking that Sergeant Garcia looked like the homely younger brother of the character Eric Estrada played on that TV cop show, *CHiPs*. He also thought that *dum-dum* was not a particularly good phrase to use when you're trying to appear more intelligent than the person you're interrogating.

"Your *ed-i-tor-ial*..." Sergeant Garcia said in a mocking, namby-pamby voice. Gordon could tell that the sergeant desperately wanted one of those high-wattage hanging interrogation lamps to shine in his

face, but he'd have to settle for the flickering, buzzing florescent lights overhead, making the room feel like the inside of a toothache, all hollowed out and grayish-green.

"It had something to do with freedom of speech," Gordon said, trying to be helpful.

"Well, I think it stinks!" Sergeant Garcia yelled, slapping his fist into his palm right in front of Gordon's face. It made Gordon flinch. He wondered if he was about to get beaten up, or hauled off to jail. Either way, it would make great fodder for his next Opinions piece.

"This man here," Sergeant Garcia said, pointing to Mr. Witzkowski, "*this guy*, should sue you for slander!"

"I think *libel* is the word you want there," said Gordon.

"Whatever! If it was up to me, I'd take you down to the river and drown you in a sack, you little smart aleck."

"Why? Because I called him a fishman?"

"A *sanctimonious* fishman," Mr. Witzkowski said, sanctimoniously.

"Well, I'm sorry about that," Gordon said. "I just thought you were looking a little trout-like that day. How can I make it up to you?"

"You *can't* make it up to me," Mr. Witzkowski said. "You hurt my feelings."

"Like I said, *I'm sorry*..."

"We're gonna suspend the holy hell outta you," Sergeant Garcia promised.

But in the end, they didn't. They were afraid of turning Gordon into a *cause célèbre*. After another twenty minutes of intimidation tactics, they sent Gordon back to class, where he immediately regaled The Big O and his fellow journalists with the tale of his persecution.

"They should've taken me with you," Jimmy said. "I was the one who took the picture, after all."

"Pictures don't lie," Mr. Olsen said; "only Gordon does."

"But he *did* look like a fishman. Anyone could see that."

"I think I'll be exercising my veto power over your captions a little more strictly from here on out," The Big O announced.

"God!" Gordon said, pretending to be offended. "What does the 'O' in The Big O stand for? *Oppressor*?"

“*Orgasm!*” Jimmy said a little too loudly, drawing the word out.

Mr. Olsen’s lightning-fast reaction took everyone by surprise. He grabbed Jimmy by the ear and marched him into the darkroom. The word *orgasm*, in the seventh grade, still had the power to shock. Everyone could hear Mr. Olsen lecturing Jimmy behind the closed darkroom door. For some reason, this cracked Gordon up. When the door opened again, Mr. Olsen came out looking sterner than anyone had ever seen him. Jimmy trailed behind him, pale and obviously shaken, but grinning behind the big man’s back to show that he was unrepentant.

So both Gordon and Jimmy emerged unbowed from their confrontations with authority that day. Each recognized in the other a certain clownish courage that eluded almost everyone else. And that was why Gordon made the decision that he and Jimmy could become friends again.

Getting ready for bed that night, Gordon wonders if he’ll live to regret that decision.



The next morning in the bathroom, Gordon gets a welcome surprise. He seems to have sprouted pubic hairs—*two of them!*—overnight.

Gordon’s first thought is to share this fabulous news with someone. But *who*? His father? No, bragging to Mal might lead to comparisons, which, however instructive, could prove embarrassing (“First pube, huh? I think I’ve still got mine somewhere...” Mal says, rummaging around in his crotch. Then: “Take a gander at this beauty, my boy!” he crows as he unreels a strand from his scrotum at least seven feet long). So who else? His mother? No, that would be impossible—almost unthinkable.... Anyway, Cynthia’s usually in the kitchen at this hour, naked, putting cucumber slices on her nipples (her boobs are swelling from the pregnancy and she claims that something in the cucumbers relieves the soreness). There could be severe consequences for Gordon if he interrupted his mother’s cucumber slicing with a whoop and a wag of his wank. Emasculation would be a distinct possibility.

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For a moment Gordon considers plucking one of the prized hairs and sending it, along with a tender love note explaining its significance, to Miss Saroyan—sort of a milder version of Van Gogh’s episode with his severed ear and an unsympathetic prostitute. But then he reconsiders. He doesn’t want Miss Saroyan thinking he’s just gotten his first one. He wants her, along with everyone else, to think he’s been growing a veritable forest down there for years.

So Gordon decides to keep the information to himself. It will be just one more secret among the many secrets about his life.

Or so he assumes—wrongly, as it turns out.



If Gordon at twelve doesn't seem like quite the same dorky genius that he was at six, it's because he's got sex on the brain. Like I said earlier, once you incarnate on Earth your spiritual awareness narrows and it gets really hard to remember that you're immortal. But even if you can hang on to some of that spiritual knowledge—like Gordon—as soon as you're exposed to sex, violence, and materialism, your past life memories start to fade. With every page that he looks at in one of Mal's porno magazines, with every car crash, rape, and decapitation that he watches on television, with every dollar that he saves for that stupid Corvette, Gordon gets a little dumber. But that's just life... there's no avoiding it—especially around puberty. By the time I hit my teens, I plan on being as dumb as dirt, too. I'm almost looking forward to it.

To make things even worse (and this is why adolescence can be such a bummer), Gordon has been abandoned by almost every one of his guardian angels. They're a lousy bunch of prudes, for the most part, and in the last few months practically every time they've checked in on Gordon they've caught him beating off. They really can't stand that sort of thing. It makes them fly off in a huff. Remember, a lot of guardian angels are like your great-grandmother Shirley, who spent her whole life sewing quilts (475 of them!), and once they die and get wings they tend to forget almost as much about being human as we forget about the Other Side once we're born. I don't know why that is... the whole set-up is crazy, if you ask me. Like, who designed this system, anyway? Thank God Gordon has a daimon looking out for him. A daimon will hang in there and let you slap the monkey all you want.

MORE BONERS

Some entities say the only reason anyone incarnates on Earth in the first place is to experience negativity. Masturbation and all that other junk (like naked beauty queens, hand grenades, and gold-plated Ferraris) would qualify as negativity, I guess. That's why the world is such an ass-backward, paradoxical place. The things you want the most usually end up being bad for you. The sun gives you skin cancer, the tastiest foods make you fat, and love will break your heart. The Buddhists have it right: life is suffering—and all suffering is caused by desire. So at first glance, it would seem like the trick is to just stop desiring stuff. But then you'd be dead, wouldn't you? Because eventually, you'd get thirsty.

So why are we born just to suffer and die (and then do it all over again)? Beats the hell out of me... I wish I had the answer for that. Karma? Negativity? Who really knows? Maybe Gordon's daimon has the scoop. All I can say is that there must be some serious lessons for our souls to learn here on Earth. Otherwise, why bother? I mean, let's face it—most human lives kind of suck.

DOCTOR SMILEY

Gordon is a sick boy. A wounded boy. A boy whose soul has been used as Kleenex by some snotty cosmic nose. He's sitting alone in the oppressive, antiseptic cheeriness of Doctor Smiley's examining room, stuck there with nothing to do but stare at the doctor's namesake smiley face wallpaper. Yellow smiley face magnets also cling to the metal cabinets and smiley face stickers are stuck on every available drawer and chair. Even the wooden tongue depressors are laminated with little smiley faces saying, "Have a nice day." *Smirking yellow bastards*, Gordon is thinking. He's feeling about as anxious and depressed as the deranged psychiatrist in his novel-in-progress, *Blind and Hairless*. For months now, he's been tormented by severe bouts of asthma, hives, and a relentless, bone-aching fatigue. He's been so sick for so long that his thoughts have been driven toward the mystic. Lately he's been wondering about the strange connections between life and literature. The other night a lordly, authoritative voice spoke to him out of the darkness of his dreams: *Think it, write it, and you shall live it*. Not comforting news, from Gordon's perspective. The other major character he's writing about in his book is a bald-headed juvenile delinquent named Eddie, who has telekinetic powers because he wasn't breastfed as a child (strontium-90 in the baby formula, and so on). The catch is that Eddie's telekinetic powers only work when he's grasping his testicles.

After the voice spoke to him, Gordon decided he should check to see how far things had gone. Early the next morning, still wearing his pajamas, he tiptoed out into the backyard, grabbed his nuts, and tried to levitate the basset hound.

No luck. Apparently those voices in his dreams aren't right about everything.

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The notion to levitate Sam probably came from Gordon's memory of the floating Doberman that he thought he saw being killed in the Smiley's backyard when he was seven. He never found out anything more about that. He asked around, made sort of an informal investigation, but no one seemed to know anything about a Doberman murder. The Rowley's dog, Raymundo—who it resembled—had disappeared right around that same time, but Rina Rowley informed Gordon that Raymundo had been hit by a truck. Raymundo had a reputation as a bad dog, always jumping over his backyard fence to go tipping over trashcans and taking dumps on other people's lawns. Sometimes he barked all night long, seemingly just for the hell of it. All of the adults in the neighborhood had hated Raymundo, although he was good with kids—kind of dumb but never vicious, not even when someone yanked on his pointy ears. Gordon wondered if the collective hate of a neighborhood was enough to kill a dog, or cause it to commit suicide. Maybe Raymundo had thrown himself under the wheels of a truck because of low dog-esteem.

Or maybe Rina Rowley had been covering up for someone. Rina was a weird girl with frizzy white hair who put Day-Glo green rubber bands on her braces and always went around with a bumpy training bra showing beneath her clothes, even though she was years from puberty. Gordon didn't think he could trust a girl like that—no more than he could trust Doctor Smiley.

Already suspect from the Doberman incident, Doctor Smiley betrayed Gordon's trust early, and unforgettably, when he became Gordon's designated pediatrician. They had their first doctor/patient encounter right after Gordon plummeted from Jimmy's tree house. Doctor Smiley just happened to be on duty at the Kingsburg Memorial Hospital when the ambulance crew wheeled Gordon into the emergency room. Because he was in shock, Gordon wasn't feeling much pain, but he was bloody and several parts of his body were invisibly swollen with numbness: his forearm, his leg, the back of his head. Doctor Smiley leaned over him—cigarette-and-bourbon breath, a smile as wide as his red bow tie—and he boomed out: "Hey, it's my little neighbor from down the street! What happened to you, kiddo?"

"I fell," Gordon said, in no mood to elaborate.

DOCTOR SMILEY

"Well, I guess you did!" Doctor Smiley said in that jocular tone that Gordon would come to despise. "Got yourself banged up pretty good there, I see! Where's it hurt?"

"All over."

"You'll have to do better than that if you want me to be your doctor today."

"Doctor Brockett's my doctor," said Gordon, thinking, *Get this jerk out of here.*

"Not anymore, he's not."

"Why? What happened to him?" Gordon struggled—and failed—to sit up.

Doctor Smiley smiled a froggy smile that made him look as if he'd just eaten a fly. (Gordon wouldn't find out about Doctor Brockett's illicit adventures with "Happy Pills" and braless hippie girls until weeks later.) "That's not for you to worry about, little man," the doctor said with a shake of his fat, balding head.

Up yours, Doctor Smiley, Gordon wanted to say, but he didn't. Someone rubbed a cold wet towel on the back of his scalp. He smelled something like alcohol, only sweeter. The next thing he knew, he was being wheeled toward the X-ray room.

The emergency room orderlies stretched Gordon out on a stainless steel table under a bulbous, beige-and-black X-ray machine. They draped a heavy lead apron across his chest, then went away. He was left there on his own for quite some time. The X-ray room's well-organized gloom seemed hyperreal and yet somehow distant, as if Gordon was floating above and beyond his broken body. His scalp itched (he didn't know it yet, but he had sixty-two stitches there). Noises were weirdly amplified. A scowling nurse showed up to do the X-rays, her white rubber-soled shoes squeaking across the linoleum like anguished chipmunks. Then there was a little buzz of radiation, accompanied far off down the corridor by the mad scientist lab sounds of a heart monitor (*robotic beeping*), a dialysis machine (*a wet clack, whirr, and shudder*), and an old woman's raspy keening. Gordon closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Doctor Smiley was standing over him, telling him he had something called a greenstick break.

"A what?" asked Gordon, feeling groggy.

“A greenstick break of the fibula. It looks like a green tree branch that’s only broken halfway through. We can’t set it that way... it’ll never mend.” Doctor Smiley’s voice was full of false fatherly concern. “We’ll have to re-break your leg.”

“Where’s Doctor Brockett?” Gordon asked, suddenly wide-awake.

He looked up to find three men in pea green operating room scrubs standing over him, their strong hands gripping his arms and the top of his broken leg. “Don’t struggle, Gordon,” Doctor Smiley told him; “you’ll only make things worse.” The sweet alcohol smell was coming from somewhere again—leaking up from inside Gordon’s throat, actually—making him feel sick. He knew what was coming next when he saw Doctor Smiley take his ankle in a two-handed grip, threatening: “If you don’t do exactly what I tell you, you’ll hurt yourself. Now don’t move!”

But Gordon was terrified. He tried to get away. The hands gripped him tighter. Then there was a horrible twisting deep inside his leg. “I said, *Don’t move, damn it!*” There was no clean snap, but instead a tortuous wrenching that created a pain to match Gordon’s high-pitched scream. After several excruciating moments the resistance gave way inside him and a splintered bone erupted through his shin.

“Damn it!” Doctor Smiley shouted in cold fury, his eyes gone wide with rage. “*Damn it!* I told you not to move! Didn’t I tell you that?” He jerked Gordon’s foot and the bloody bone retracted like a turtle’s head back into the bleeding skin. Then, not living up to his name for once, Doctor Smiley turned and stalked away.



After that episode, there was no way Gordon wanted to have anything to do with Doctor Smiley as his pediatrician. But for some reason (having roots in sadism, Gordon suspected) his mother had become convinced that Doctor Smiley was a great healer. He had some quack theories about allergies that sounded promising to Cynthia’s way of thinking, and even though she had no medical background whatsoever, she went around telling everyone that Doctor Smiley was a genius who would revolutionize the treatment of asthmatic children. She proudly

volunteered Gordon as a guinea pig for the doctor's radical new experiments.

Gordon had no choice in the matter. That was the trouble with being a child—you were always a peasant in the medieval court of the grown-ups, unable to deflect any suffering they might want to inflict on you. It was, of course, wildly unfair... but what could he do? Even at the wizened age of almost thirteen, Gordon still didn't have enough sovereignty to pick his own doctor.

So Gordon had spent the last six years being poked and prodded by Doctor Smiley and his minions. He had endured years of allergy shots, which only seemed to make his asthma grow worse. He had participated in studies for new medicines, enduring side effects that included shingles, hives, projectile vomiting, jaundice, bubbling green diarrhea, and a kind of hallucinatory lassitude that resembled rapture of the deep. Almost everything Doctor Smiley did only served to make Gordon sicker (it seemed as though the only time Gordon experienced the glow of health was when Doctor Smiley was on vacation), but in spite of the doctor's obvious incompetence, Gordon's mother never lost faith in him.

Over the last three months, Doctor Smiley has been subjecting Gordon to a battery of tests designed to identify and categorize his immune system response to every single potential allergen known to mankind. Twice a week, Gordon has had to experience the humiliation of walking through the garishly-painted door to Doctor Smiley's office (displaying a likeness of Winnie-the-Pooh chasing a lemon yellow balloon with, of course, one of those ubiquitous smiley faces stenciled on it). Then, after an interminable wait, he's ushered into a small examining room, stripped to his undershorts, and subjected to a nurse who covers his back with thirty-two numbered dots. Beneath each dot, solutions containing minute particles of specific allergens are injected via syringe. The solutions are of Doctor Smiley's own devising, intended to induce tiny allergic reactions in the form of welts, which can then be graded on a scale of zero (no reaction) to four (extremely reactive). In this fashion, Gordon has been tested for allergic reactions to over five hundred supposed allergens, from the usual suspects like cat dander, dust mites, and ragweed pollen, to more fanciful culprits

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like fried pork rinds, Shasta Root Beer, and his grandmother's green tapioca pudding.

The result: Gordon has exhibited 4+ reactions to everything except iced tea and boiled potatoes—a new record.

Doctor Smiley now considers Gordon his star patient, a freak of medicine. In the meantime, Gordon has become so weakened by his body's violent reaction to the testing that he's feeling close to death. He has a resting heart rate of 160. He tends to pass out if he stands up too fast. His asthma is now a constant presence, slowly suffocating him and making him feel useless. At night, he suffers from insomnia, which is only occasionally broken up by brief, gasping dreams. In the morning, he wakes with angry red welts slashed across his back and chest, as if he's been clawed by a jilted succubus. He throws up when the telephone rings, experiences teeth-chattering chills in the midday sun, and his bones ache like a rotten tooth that runs the whole length and breadth of his skeleton. It's a life hardly worth living, but unlike his previous bouts of childhood illness, he hasn't been consoling himself with thoughts of an early demise.

He wants to get laid first.

There's a fat, sexually voracious high school girl named Sissy "Marshmallow" Marshall on the other side of town who will reputedly screw anyone in exchange for two six-packs of Diet Coke and a bag of beef jerky. Gordon has been thinking of taking her up on that offer. The scenario has tumbled over and over in his mind. He's even written a passage about it in his novel, projecting his complex feelings onto the bald juvenile offender, Eddie, who becomes so drunk on Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer at his senior prom that he's caught leering at Sissy's massive rear end in her pink polyester stretch pants ("every bulge and ripple of flab arrogantly displayed..."). Later that same night, Sissy rapes Eddie on the reed-choked banks of the Kings River. Eddie becomes severely depressed about the incident, alternating between bouts of misbegotten love for the desperate girl and periods of self-loathing. Eventually, he works out his emotional conflict in a lyric poem, appropriately titled, *A Love Song for Sissy the River-Con:*

Off we went then, you and I,
With your pink polyester lighting up the sky
As if your lumpy butt was made of neon Jell-O;

DOCTOR SMILEY

Off we went, trudging through weeds and muck,
To fulfill a promised suck.
Although I might've guessed you weren't a lady.
It turned out you were a bovine nightmare, Baby.
Not satisfied with merely chewing the cud,
You violated my pud,
And I was plunged into hot throbbing horror...
Recalling that night we saw the ignis fatuus
Only serves to make me gaseous,
Like the women who wheeze and stomp
Bitching about Marcel Duchamp.

How could I have known the evil of your ways
When your naked enormity set my brain ablaze?
With no conception of your predilection,
I was led by my erection,
Into the multitudinous folds of your flesh.
I've never been one to make long range plans,
I measure out my life in twelve-ounce cans,
But pay for you by the ounce?
"Never," says the jester,
"The check would bounce."

Now the women are raising hell
Wanting to crucify Luis Buñuel.

I've often thought to sue you for rape,
My back is still bent out of shape.
But I seem to be without recourse to the law.
After all, I had a certain spasm,
In loftier circles called Orgasm,
And this, it would seem, was a fatal faux pas.
Silver spots boiled in front of my eyes,
Thrusting between your hippopotamus thighs,
And this has caused me a shitload of grief.
Testicular relief
Was never worth all that.

I should have been a pair of lobster claws
Tap dancing in a bowl of split pea soup.

The poem's structure was lifted from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, of course. Gordon has been finding poetry more illuminating than prose lately. Keats, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Auden, Rilke, and Stevens have all been checked out on his library card in the last few months. The world would be a barren place for him without library books. He should have brought one along to pass the time while he waits for today's allergy shot. There's nothing to read in

Doctor Smiley's examining room aside from a chipper Disney-illustrated version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and two curled up, goober-stained editions of *Highlights*, an inane children's magazine.

Gordon has already flipped through both of the magazines with a creeping sense of disgust—page after page of cartoon skunks smelling daffodils, moronic word games, simplistic math puzzles, and not-so-subtle exhortations to obey Mommy and Daddy. The only thing he found even mildly entertaining was a cartoon strip about two brothers: one a disdainful rebel like himself, named Goofus; the other, a goody-goody ass kisser named Gallant. Goofus and Gallant were depicted having parallel adventures in which Gallant, for example, espoused vegetarianism while Goofus wanted to taste barbecued squirrel guts. Gallant was always praised in the end, but Gordon was secretly rooting for Goofus all along. And what did his insanely moralizing parents expect out of him, anyway, giving him a name like Goofus? The poor kid was screwed right from the start. If Goofus ended up doing drugs and listening to Jimi Hendrix with his stereo cranked up too loud, well, who could blame him?

Even the back of a cereal box would be welcome reading material now. Out of desperation, Gordon picks up *Snow White*. He's just starting to thumb through the pages (daydreaming about sadomasochistic sex games with the Wicked Queen) when the door opens with a *whoosh* and Doctor Smiley steps inside looking lively, trailing a noxious mist of drugstore cologne.

"Well, hello there, Gordon! How've we been feeling today?"

Gordon takes his cue from the book in his lap, answering, "We've been feeling grumpy, sneezy, sleepy, and dopey."

"Ho-ho!" Doctor Smiley booms in his big, *I'm-such-a-happy-go-lucky-guy* voice. "Looks like we've got four out of seven dwarfs there! Which ones are we missing?"

"Bashful, Happy, and Doc. Between the two of us, we've got all but one."

Doctor Smiley fakes a fat grin. "That's clever, Gordon. Now take off your pants."

"Can't you just give me the shot in my arm today?"

"I'm afraid I have to take a look at your penis."

DOCTOR SMILEY

"It's fine. I've already checked."

"Look at that!" Doctor Smiley crows, rubbing his hands together with manic glee. "You're bashful! We're seven for seven now!"

"Big whoop..." says Gordon, unbuckling his belt.

Gordon's visits to Doctor Smiley have always felt degrading, but with this new imperative ("*Wag your penis at the smiling clown with the red bow tie...*") Gordon can feel himself sinking toward whole new depths of abjection. What's worse, he still has half a hard-on from his S&M fantasies about the Wicked Queen and he's worried now that dumb, potentially homosexual Doctor Smiley might think it's for him. Then again, maybe having half a hard-on is a good thing: at least he'll look bigger... although he's still not sure he has a full-fledged, adult-sized penis—at least not yet.

"Hmmm.... There seems to be a stiff breeze blowing through here," Doctor Smiley says, squinting at Gordon's partial erection. He puts on a pair of reading glasses and leans in for a closer look.

"Just hurry up..." says Gordon, looking at the ceiling.

"Holy Cow! You've got a few hairs there!"

"So?"

"So?" Doctor Smiley says in that bombastic voice of his, like King Lear doing voice-over on a commercial for used cars and trucks. "*So?* You're a man now!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can have sex. You can get a girl pregnant! Have you ever thought about *that?*"

"Not really..." Gordon demurs, knowing he has been thinking of little else.

"You can't fool me, Gordon.... Pull up your pants. I've got something I want to show you."

Doctor Smiley sits down on a black padded stool and starts rummaging around in the bottom drawer of a metal file cabinet. He emerges with a shiny, laminated, four-color brochure—something like the menu from a sushi restaurant. He waves it under Gordon's nose. "See this?" he says. "Look. This is what can happen to you if you're not careful."

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

The brochure shows photographs of a wide variety of genitalia in the final stages of venereal disease—exotic yellow and purplish warts, gaping sores, dripping wounds. Most of them look more like sea anemones than human sex organs.

“That’s pretty disgusting, Doctor Smiley,” Gordon says, trying to downplay his repulsion.

“Look at that one there! That’s what syphilis does.”

“I just thought it made you go blind.” Gordon’s hand involuntarily gropes at his crotch.

“Nope. Some little sweetheart comes along and sticks her tongue in your ear, says she’ll show you a good time—and the next thing you know, your dingus is about ready to drop off.” Looking stern, Doctor Smiley says, “I want you to watch yourself, Gordon. And promise me: no sex before marriage—at least not without a condom.”

Gordon promises Doctor Smiley he’ll watch himself very carefully

“And if the condom ever breaks for some reason, try scrubbing with a Brillo pad afterward,” Doctor Smiley suggests. “It’s always worked for me.”

Gordon’s expression is slack-jawed, entirely credulous.

“I’m just kidding, Gordon. A *joke*....” Doctor Smiley looks him up and down with what might almost pass for sympathy. He scoots his stool over to a small desk and takes out a prescription pad. Starting to write, he says, “You’re looking a little pale and wheezy. I think I’ll put you on a course of steroids—something called Prednisone. It’s powerful stuff. Should perk you right up.”

“Does it have any side-effects?” Gordon asks, recalling his previous bouts with Doctor Smiley’s powerful medicines.

“Compromised adrenal function, liver and kidney damage, lots of stuff.... But we won’t keep you on it long enough to do any lasting harm. In the short run, I think it’s your best shot.”

“Okay then...” says Gordon. Who is he to argue? He’s still considering the gruesome effects of gonorrhea and its ilk, thinking, *Thank God for antibiotics*.



DOCTOR SMILEY

What I love about Doctor Smiley is that the fat flake actually thinks he knows what he's doing, when in reality he's just being used by a higher force. In other words, he's a quack, but a quack with a purpose. Gordon could have told him as much, if he'd looked for clues in the poetry he's been reading lately. W. H. Auden said it best:

"We are lived by powers we pretend to understand."

Here's the deal: Gordon's daimon needed a way to stay in touch with him on a regular basis—an open channel between this world and the Other Side. It didn't look like Gordon would be going the monk route and learning to meditate anytime soon (masturbation doesn't qualify, unfortunately—it's actually the flip side of meditation), so it was decided that making Gordon chronically ill would be the next best choice. But there was a problem: any halfway decent pediatrician would have had Gordon up and running around like a healthy little maniac in no time. There were drugs, even then, that would've gotten Gordon's asthma and allergies under control. So, working with the materials at hand, Gordon's daimon threw Doctor Smiley into the mix. And that dorkwad of a doctor did exactly what he was supposed to do: he screwed up Gordon's health to the point where he'd be sick for most of his young life.

I know that sounds harsh.... From any way of looking at it but a daimon's, it basically sucks. While Gordon's little buddies were tearing around on football fields and jumping their bikes over ditch banks, Gordon sat around on his butt all day wheezing and reading books. But look at it this way: those little jocks and future farmers of America never had a shot at transcending their origins. They grew up thinking they'd have lives pretty much like the lives of their parents—a regular job, a regular wife, and regular kids. If it all went A-okay, a new Cadillac might be in their future. For Gordon, however, the future was wide open, because he was becoming much more imaginative.

In fact, Gordon has been tapped for far greater (and stranger) things. That's why he has a daimon in the first place. In this life, like the last, he's destined to become an artist. Only this time, words will be as important to him as images. A good chunk of his life will be spent trying to grab the dragon tail of consciousness and shake off its scales into neat little rows of black on white. Letters onto paper. Spirit into matter. He's going to become a writer. Or a Scribe, as they call the position on the Other Side.

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

Becoming a Scribe is no easy thing. Not everyone's cut out for it. Being sick a lot of the time is only half of it—and in that respect, Gordon is actually getting off kind of easy. There are worse diseases that have kept daimons in close contact with their charges throughout history. I mean, think about it. It could have been syphilis (a route Doctor Smiley warned Gordon off). Syphilis works great, as a matter of fact. Some pretty famous writers did their best work while suffering from it. Isak Dinesen got a royal case of it coming out of Africa. Its evil flowers bloomed in Baudelaire. (How are you liking these cornball allusions to the authors' work so far?) Syphilis was at the birth of Nietzsche's tragedy, it caused Rimbaud to pass a season in hell, and it provided an unsentimental education for Flaubert.

Tuberculosis has also done wonders for an amazing number of writers. Just for starters, there's Kafka, Chekov, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Thoreau, Emerson, Jane Austen, Eugene O'Neill, George Orwell, Robert Louis Stevenson, D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, and all five of the Bronte sisters. And that's not all.... Byron had tuberculosis and Shelly would have died of it if he hadn't drowned first. It gave Albert Camus that existential feeling and Edgar Allen Poe his morbid twist. As a way of weakening the human vessel so the Other Side comes through loud and clear, tuberculosis used to be the disease of choice.

But then modern medicine took it out, along with syphilis. So Gordon's daimon decided to go with the next best thing: asthma. Which is kind of a wimpy disease, a disease for people who blow-dry their hair, maybe. But hey, it definitely gets the job done. If it was good enough for John Updike, Che Guevara, Marcel Proust, and Philip K. Dick, it's good enough for anyone.

There's something else Auden said: "Art is born of humiliation"—and that's the other half of the equation. Writers need to have something to write about, and for some reason humiliation spurs them on better than anything else. Gordon has already had plenty of humiliation, and there's more coming, of course. It's just the price you pay for walking around as a human. When spirit is made flesh, and you can remember what it was like when you were only spirit, flesh can seem kind of gross.

To tell the truth, sometimes flesh can get so downright disgusting it can make you ashamed to be alive. Human bodies always seem to come to a bad end. But maybe that's just nature's way of making you look past biology toward the soul.

Or God's way of saying, "Stay humble."

STILL MORE BONERS

Cinco de Mayo, 1979, falls on a Saturday. To show his solidarity with his mostly Mexican crew, Mal has closed the lumberyard for the day. He feels like it's time to go a little crazy. Time to let it all hang out. Mal Swannson is up for a walk on the wild side and he doesn't give a hoot who knows.

By mid-afternoon Mal can be found out on the backyard patio, wearing a leopard skin Speedo and a jazzy black sombrero. He's tending the barbecue, watching the flesh char on a slab of marinated flank steak. As Mal flips the meat he does a little shuffling dance to Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. "A Taste of Honey" is blaring through the open windows from the living room's stereo system. That jungle cat bikini is riding low on his flat hips, revealing more of his hairy butt crack with each syncopated knee slap, but Mal doesn't give a damn. He's fogged on mezcal, Campari, and Del Monte canned peach juice—his own cockeyed version of a Tequila Sunrise—something he's dubbed *Señorita's Menses*. He's throwing a party to celebrate the recent completion of his built-in swimming pool, and that red-hot mama with the big *bazoombas*, Janice Marrsden, is the special guest of honor.

Does that make him feel like a love-drunk Speedy Gonzales? You *bet* it does!

He's waited a long time for this moment. That swimming pool took a heck of a lot longer to put in the ground than he ever would've thought. He was out there for months, giving away free beers to all the backhoe operators and the pool tile specialists, trying to make sure the job got done right. Now he has what he wanted: a deep blue watery jewel in the shape of a pregnant kidney bean, hugging a Jacuzzi along its middle—all of it surrounded by a wide ribbon of adobe-colored Kool Deck.

It's a thing of beauty.

Even though the weather is still a little cool, he's got that sucker heated up to 82 degrees Fahrenheit—bathtub temperature. And the sun's out, casting deep shadows from his big ol' sombrero, so it's a perfect day for the first swim. Earlier, scheming Mal had told Gordon he could invite Jimmy over for a dip, then he added as a sly afterthought, "And heck, tell Jimmy's mom she can come along, too!" A few minutes later, Janice called Cynthia to say they would be right over—so now the party's set. Cynthia is in the kitchen, mixing up some guacamole and smearing refried beans on Nacho Cheese Doritos. She has on her one-piece navy blue swimsuit with the white sailor's anchor stitched above the hidden Control-Top girdle. It's almost a miracle, but even *she* seems happy for once—although about an hour ago they got into it because she wants him to buy life insurance.

"Why?" he asked her, outraged. "So you can live like Jackie Onassis once I'm dead?" Mal had started in early on the mezcal, and even then, on his second drink of the day (okay... maybe it was his *third*), it was bringing out the warrior in him.

"Don't you want us to be safe if something happens to you?" Cynthia wailed, looking like she needed to pop a pill.

With Cynthia it was always about being safe. That's why he'd had to get rid of the speedboat, the go-karts, and his 1958 Corvette—which, by the way, would have been worth a small fortune if he'd held on to it. *That bitch!*

"Sure, I want you to be safe," Mal said, feeling a tightening vise of anger along his temples and the back of his neck. "You're already safe. You don't have to be *rich!*"

"You just don't care about us. It's always about what's best for you."

"I don't see you paying any of the bills around here."

"*Money, money, money!* Is that all you ever think about?"

Around and around they went, until Mal got sick of it and decided to put on his sombrero and his leopard skin bathing suit. Then he sent Gordon off on his errand and Cynthia came out later to apologize after she got off the phone with Janice.

Now everything is right in Mal's world. He has a half-full bottle of mezcal with a lumpy worm in the bottom of it; Herb Alpert's trumpet is telling him it's never too late to become a swinger; and the smell of burning cow meat is shooting straight up his nostrils, making his mouth water with a caveman's hunger. He's got it all right here—all the props he needs to feed, fight, and fuck.

He hears one of the sliding glass doors from the den roll open, hitting the end of its track with a dull *whoomp*. Gordon and Jimmy come jogging out of the house in their swim trunks, waving beach towels above their heads. "Hi, Dad!" Gordon shouts as he goes vaulting over the low wrought-iron fence in front of the Kool Deck. "Hey, Mr. Swannson!" says Jimmy, doing the same. And then they're both jumping into the pool feet first, shouting like young gorillas. Their splashes leave Mal grinning. There was some acrimony when he sold the cabin in Morro Bay to finance the pool, but now he's sure he did the right thing.

It's a relief for Mal to see Gordon finally showing some pep. For a long time the poor kid's asthma was so bad it was turning him into just a bump on a log, but those new pills that Doctor Smiley put him on really seem to be doing the trick. Now Gordon eats about three times as much as he used to and runs around like a house on fire. He's gained about 20 pounds in the last month—most of it, unfortunately, in his cheeks. He looks like a crazed chipmunk, but at least he's got energy.

Look at him now: splashing around like some kind of weird, bloated, hairless otter—Samantha barking at him from the edge of the Kool Deck. They should be on *The Wonderful World of Disney* in one of those nature episodes with the folksy voice-over narration, like "Charlie, The Lonesome Cougar."

Hopefully that cheek thing is something Gordon will grow out of. He's just hit puberty, after all. Maybe it's a growth spurt. If those cheeks get any worse, he'll have a hard time with the ladies.

Thinking of which, Mal turns to see Janice Marrsden stepping out onto the patio, covered up with some kind of summery shawl—but her legs are bare, so his dream of seeing her in a bikini still seems within reach. But then coming up from behind her—*oh shit!*—it's her

dang husband, Stan Marrsden, smiling in an Army green T-shirt and a pair of canary yellow madras shorts.

Stan isn't a big man—at least not compared to Mal's six-foot-seven—but he's broad-shouldered and muscular with dark features that make him look Greek. He has a square jaw, "*Don't-mess-with-me*" eyes, and like Johnny Hoss, his neck looks bigger than his head. He used to play football for the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis; Mal's heard he made a good defensive end. He's not someone Mal would ever want to tangle with, anyway, but tangling with him now would be an especially bad idea since Stan happens to be Kingsburg's Chief of Police.

Having thought that, Mal still wants to get a good look at Stan's wife in a skimpy bathing suit.

"Mal! You're looking festive today..." Stan says, indicating the sombrero.

Mal booms out a cheery greeting and shakes Stan's hand, wondering if he can be arrested in his own backyard for being drunk and almost naked. He hadn't anticipated another full-grown man seeing him this way. He's kind of embarrassed. But then the opposite of that sensation, a spiteful pride, boils through Mal like a hot geyser. He thinks, *Why should I feel embarrassed? Look at me, a virile mountain of a man! So what if I'm wearing a tiny Speedo that looks like a hooker's G-string? Check out the package that it's barely holding back. I've got a dong on me like the clapper in the Liberty Bell. Can you measure up to that, Stan Marrsden? Huh? Maybe that's why you came over in your faggy yellow golf pants.*

But even Mal has to admit to himself that the sombrero might be a bit much.

To heck with it! Mal offers Stan a drink. Hoisting a glass, he says, "What'll you have, Stan? Beer, *vino*... or how about a little mezcal like our Mexicano brothers are drinking today?"

"What is that, a worm in there?" Stan asks, inspecting the mezcal bottle.

"That's how you know it's the real deal!" Mal exclaims. "Mezcal is made from fermented cactus juice, and these worms live right on the cactus plants. They're called *gusanos*. There are three different kinds..." Mal is half making this stuff up as he goes along, but he's enjoying himself—so why stop? "First there's the *blanco gusano*, which lives on

the agave cactus. It's the most common. It just turns gray and dies when it gets dropped in the mezcal, so it only goes in the cheapest stuff. Next there's the *rojo gusano*, which is a little rarer. Its skin is pale red because it feeds off the blossoms of the saguaro cactus. It can last up to six months in the bottle without dying, so it gets put in the better stuff. Then there's the very rarest *gusano*, the *cielo gusano*, which lives on the peyote cactus—the same cactus the shamans eat so they can go on their vision quests. Peyote has this hallucinogen called mescaline in it, which is where mezcal gets its name. So the ol' *cielo gusano* only goes in the absolute very best mezcal—the stuff fermented from peyote cactus—which is what we've got here. You can tell it's a *cielo gusano* because it's blue, see? And because it's still crawling around in there..." Mal taps the bottle to simulate movement. "The *cielo gusano* can live forever in mezcal—it's immortal—and its body is so full of concentrated mescaline that if you eat it, they say you'll hallucinate your ass off."

"Sounds like that stuff should be illegal," Stan says with a wink. "I'll have a double."

"Let me get this meat off the grill and I'll get right to it," says Mal, grabbing the flank steak with a pair of tongs. Turning to Janice—and Cynthia, just joining her with a tray full of chips, beans, and guacamole—he asks, "How about you gals? Something to wet your whistles?"

"Nothing with worms in it for me, thanks," says Janice, taking a long drag off her cigarette. "I'll just have a glass of gin—straight up."

After the drinks are poured and the flank steak is cut up into finger-sized pieces, the four adults settle into the Jacuzzi. Trays of food and bottles of booze are set within easy reach. Janice finally sheds her shawl and Mal's brooding patience is rewarded: she's wearing the same sharp little white bikini that Ursula Andress wore in that James Bond movie. Even better, when it gets wet, it becomes almost see-through. Janice's nipples show up underneath it like raspberries rising through cream. Her areolas, prominently outlined, look as big as buttermilk biscuits.

"So how'd you learn so much about mezcal?" Stan asks Mal.

Mal is having a hard time keeping his eyes away from Janice's knockers. He turns to face her husband. "Cynthia didn't tell you? I

went in as a partner on a liquor store up in Fresno with Sammy Beaufont about six months ago.”

“Sammy Beaufont... his family owns Beaufont’s Restaurant, right?”

“Right. He’s their son.”

“Great food.”

“Yeah, it’s the only true gourmet restaurant in town. Sammy grew up in it. He knows more about wine than anyone.”

“Have you tried their frog legs?” Cynthia asks Janice.

“No. Why would I?”

“Oh, they’re scrumptious!” Cynthia pops a Dorito glopped with refried beans into her mouth, smacking her lips in a compulsive, grimacing way that’s most often seen in institutionalized schizophrenics after years of Thorazine treatment (*tardive dyskinesia*, the medical establishment calls it).

“When I was a kid, Gerald and I used to spear frogs for the Beaufonts out on the Kings River,” says Mal. “We’d go out late at night with flashlights and when we saw the reflections in their eyes we’d take a frog gig and—*whammo!* We’d get bullfrogs big as rabbits. Some nights whole gunnysacks full of ‘em.”

“What’d they pay you for ‘em?” Stan wants to know.

“I don’t know... maybe a nickel apiece. We were doing it more for sport.”

“Men...” says Janice, with a look of cool disgust.

“They’re always trying to spear *something*,” Cynthia says with the air of one who knows.

“Hey, I’ve never speared anything,” Stan protests.

“Oh, you’re just as bad, running around everywhere with your gun sticking out,” says Janice. “We all know what Freud would’ve had to say about *that*.”

“Let’s not start in with the penis envy again,” says Stan.

“Who’s?” Janice shoots back. “Yours or mine?”

Mal senses tension and like a good host he attempts to defuse it by saying, “Hey, how about another *Señorita’s Menses* there, *compadre?*”

STILL MORE BONERS

“Is that what you call these things?” says Stan, staring with deadened eyes at his empty glass. “Sure, fill ‘er up.”

“Even the drinks around here are sexist...” Janice says, tamping out her cigarette on a soggy Dorito near the gin bottle. She and Cynthia have been attending women’s consciousness raising meetings, about ten years too late. Trends have a way of skipping over the San Joaquin Valley, then boomeranging back a decade later. Late or not, it’s still been hell on the husbands, just like it must have been for those guys in New York City and Marin County back in the sixties. They’ve gotten themselves all wrapped up in something called the Four-P Club, which Mal is pretty sure stands for *P*osturing, *P*ussy-Empowered, *P*issed-Off *P*enis-Haters.

“Marco!” Jimmy shouts from the deep end of the swimming pool, where he’s bobbing in the water with his eyes squinched shut.

“Polo!” Gordon shouts back, standing in the shallows near the pool’s edge. Sam sits like a basset hound version of the Sphinx on the Kool Deck behind Gordon, licking the chlorinated water off his ears.

Mal runs through the last of the mezcal as he mixes Stan and himself another round of drinks. “Whoops!” he says. “This bottle’s a goner. Anyone up for eating the worm?”

“Oh, *ick!*” says Cynthia.

“I’ll pass,” says Janice, lighting a new cigarette.

“Stan?”

“You go ahead, Mal. I’m an officer of the law. It wouldn’t look too good if I was caught hallucinating my rear end off.”

“Chicken...” Janice says, blowing smoke.

“Okay, so I guess it’s up to me then. You guys don’t know what you’re missing...” Mal dangles the chubby blue worm above his lips, for effect, then drops it onto his tongue and gulps. It stalls in his throat like a wad of gum. He stifles a gag and thumps his sternum with the heel of his palm to help the blind creature on its way down. Halfway convinced by his own mythologizing, Mal says in a low croak:

“Hope I don’t see Quetzalcoatl.”

“What’s that?” Stan asks.

“A feathered serpent the Aztec medicine priests used to see on their shamanic journeys. Sometimes Quetzalcoatl would show up with his twin and answer all their questions about the universe.”

“*Sheesh!* How do you know about all this stuff, Mal?”

“Like I said, I own a liquor store. Oh... and Gordon’s been reading stuff to me.”

After he gets home from work, Mal likes to sit down in his big blue La-Z-Boy recliner in the den and look at the newspaper. *The Fresno Bee* almost never has anything in it worth reading, but for some reason he finds it soothing. For almost as long as he can remember, Gordon has sat on the couch next to him doing the same thing, only he gets through *The Bee* in about five minutes, and then he’s on to magazines—like *Time* and *Newsweek*, and even his mother’s *Cosmopolitan*—and after that it’s library books. Sometimes Gordon will interrupt Mal’s reading to say something like, “Hey Dad, did you know that the right hemisphere of a dolphin’s brain can sleep while its left hemisphere stays awake, and vice-versa, so that a dolphin never completely falls asleep like we do?” Or: “Hey Dad, did you know that neural DNA is non-metabolizing? Every other cell in our bodies gets replaced at least once every seven years, but we’ve got the same neural DNA we had as babies. Some people think it acts as an antenna for memory. Not just personal memory, but the whole collective unconscious, like Carl Jung wrote about.” And: “Hey, did you know that ninety-five percent of a person’s brain can be destroyed without impairing memory function? This guy named Karl Pribram has a theory that memory isn’t stored in any specific part of the brain. He thinks memory works like a hologram, and any tiny piece of it can recreate the whole thing. Maybe a single strand of neural DNA is all it takes.”

It’s annoying as hell, but in a weird way, educational.

Sam’s sudden barking captures everyone’s attention. They look over and see Jimmy and Gordon tussling in the middle of the pool. It looks like they’re trying to drown each other. Gordon yelps just before his head disappears underwater and Sam, with a heroic yelp of her own, leaps into the pool to defend her young master.

Sam paddles furiously across the water toward Gordon and Jimmy, who both stop their struggling and come up for air to observe

the absurd sight: the dismayed dog with her head barely above water—huffing from exertion—as her long, floppy brown ears float alongside her like hairy pontoons.

“Sam!” Gordon says, treading water. “I didn’t know you could swim.”

Only when she’s awake, everyone soon realizes, as the excitement proves too much for Sam and narcolepsy steals over her. Her eyes roll around like loose marbles as she takes one final breath, then the water closes above her head. She sinks toward the bottom of the pool like a torpedoed basset hound submarine.

“*Uh-oh*. Can dogs breath underwater?” Jimmy asks.

As the four adults watch all this from the Jacuzzi, it’s Stan who stands up and decides to take action. With steamy water dripping from his yellow shorts, Stan leaps from the Jacuzzi into the pool, diving deep to retrieve the dog’s quavering form. A few tense moments pass as Stan—like a merman—completes his underwater rescue, then he surfaces with Sam in his brawny arms. Gordon and Jimmy help him get her over to the Kool Deck, where Stan lays the soggy dog on her side and starts pumping his clenched fist up and down on her diaphragm, in a modified version of CPR.

“Give her mouth-to-mouth, Stan!” Janice shouts, waving a bottle of gin from the Jacuzzi. She puts her lips to the bottle and gulps.

Closer to the action, Gordon asks, “Is she all right?”

Sam shudders and coughs up water with a big doggy *gak*. She sneezes and looks at Stan still pumping away at her chest, then she scrambles to get up. She coughs up more water over by the fence, retching as Gordon and Jimmy cheer, then she takes a wide stance on her short little legs and shakes herself off. A fizz of water flies everywhere.

“Way to go, Dad!” Jimmy says. “You saved Sam!”

“Thanks, Mister Marrsden,” Gordon adds politely, wondering why his own father hadn’t been the one to save the day.

Mal is asking himself that, too. The answer, of course, is that Mal is far too drunk for quick thinking. His reflexes are shot. He’s completely shit-faced. Hammered. Bombed out of his skull.

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

Maybe mezcal really does have mescaline in it, thinks Mal. I thought that was just my own happy horseshit, but if I start seeing feathered snakes flying around yapping at me, then I'll know for sure.

While Mal is grimly assessing his own diminished capacities, Stan struts back to the Jacuzzi to bask in glory after his heroics.

“You looked like quite the stud while you were saving that dog, Stan,” Janice says with just a trace of venom.

“Really, Stan, you got us both horny,” says Cynthia, who’s more than a little soused herself.

Mal just stares into space, thinking of ancient Toltec gods and the \$360,000 he has tied up in Sammy’s wine and booze inventory.

“Look at this!” Stan says, brushing his arms. “I’ve got dog hair all over.... I don’t want to bring it in the Jacuzzi with me. I better go do a victory lap to get this stuff off.”

“We’ll watch from here, you big hero,” says Cynthia.

“Oh *please*...” Janice groans.

Trying to look like Johnny Weissmuller in one of those old *Tarzan* movies, Stan springs off the diving board back into the pool. When he surfaces, he turns over and starts doing the backstroke, spouting a stream of water from his puckered lips for comic effect. “Man, this is the life!” he shouts. He’s halfway across the pool when a thready cloud of violet blooms in the churning water and starts trailing in his wake.

“Hey, Dad!” shouts Jimmy, still standing at the edge of the pool, watching his father swim. “Dad! What’s that purple stuff coming off your pants?”

Stan looks down. Jimmy’s right—something’s going on. A watery purple jellyfish seems to be emanating from his shorts. It’s getting more inky and obvious by the second. Being privy to certain bodily functions he had hoped to conceal from everyone else, Stan—to his great chagrin—suddenly knows what’s up. His only way out is to pretend ignorance, but it’s a long shot.

“What the heck is this?” Stan asks, clambering out of the pool from the steps at the shallow end. Pretending outrage, he stands staring at the purple water dripping down his legs and swears, “Goddamnit, the dye in my dang pants must’ve run.”

Mal—out of his mezcal trance now—is overcome with a fit of drunken giggling. It's making it hard for him to talk: "Your pants are yellow, Stan. Just like something else would be—*normally*. But I, um, put this special chemical in the pool. It turns... *purple*... when the kids... *go wee-wee*..." He's almost choking on hilarity now. "I guess the kids weren't the only ones I had to worry about." That's it. Mal throws back his head and laughs.

"Oh, Stan!" says Janice.

Stan just stands there, humiliated, with a big purple stain marring the crotch of his shorts. "Well, you could've warned me," he grumbles.

"I guess I wasn't counting on you taking a leak in my pool there, Stanley."

"You're just like a little boy," Janice tells her husband. "You shouldn't've drunk so much iced tea before we came over!"

"C'mon, Stan..." Cynthia says, rising from the Jacuzzi, "I'll take you to the shower and find some of Mal's clothes for you to put on."

"God, I'm so sorry about this, Cynthia," Stan says, head down, morosely tagging along behind her as she waddles, flat-footed, toward the house.

"Don't sweat it, Stan," she says, lighting a cigarette. "I've seen Mal do much worse."

Gordon and Jimmy follow them inside. "I think we're done swimming today," Gordon says, stating the obvious. "Can me and Jimmy go shoot some pool down at the arcade?"

Cynthia and Stan tell the boys they can go, just to get them out of the way.

Back at the Jacuzzi, Janice has scooted over a little closer to Mal. "Can they see us out here from inside the house?" she asks him.

Mal feels a quiet thrill, like a little kid in a hideout (which was usually just some overturned couch with sheets covering it in his day, but *what the hell*...). "We're safe," he assures Janice. "I designed it so no one could spy on us."

"That's great, Mal," Janice says, stubbing out a cigarette, then reaching for her bikini straps. "So... you wanna see my boobs?"

"What?"

“Oh, c’mon, you’ve hardly stopped staring at ‘em since I got here. So take a good look, why don’t you? It’s okay with me. Knock yourself out.” And with a few quick yanks, Janice has her bikini top all the way off.

“Wow!” says Mal, dumbfounded. “They’re really, really great!” In fact, they’re everything he’s fantasized about and more. For Mal, it’s the über-rack, the ne plus ultra of titties—the archetype of perfect jugs. He can feel the blood thundering into his erection, straining against the stretchy fabric of his Speedo like a catapult readying to launch a burning log across an enemy queen’s battlements.

Janice puts her hand on him under the water. “Christ, you’ve got a big one,” she says, stroking him. “Let’s get it out of that swimsuit so it can breathe a little.” She tugs on the band of Mal’s Speedo and his one-eyed monster springs free, dazzled in the bubbles of the Jacuzzi jets. “Let me get a grip on this Big Boy now....” Her fingers encircle the glans of his penis, then move a little lower and clench him tight.

“Oh gosh, Janice!” Mal jolts and bucks.

“Do you like my tits, Mal?”

“*God!* They’re fantastic!”

“D’you wanna fuck them?” Janice starts stroking him with vigor.

“*Hell yes!*”

“Show me how you’d fuck them, Mal....”

She’s really pumping him now. Mal’s left leg is twitching like a dog with an insatiable itch. He tries to rise up in the Jacuzzi, toward Janice’s glistening breasts, but she pushes him back down. It’s as if his body is a balloon and she’s holding the string. “No,” she says, enjoying her power over him. “Not until you’re ready to come for me.”

“I’m ready,” says Mal, gritting his teeth.

“Then show me your cock.”

She lets him float up again. The head of Mal’s penis emerges from the roiling water like a fleshy red periscope. She moves toward him slowly, like one of Neptune’s topless daughters carved on the bowsprit of a majestic old sailing ship, until her slick, silky breasts engulf him. Squeezing, she lets him pump his rod between them. Then, with a sort of spastic inhaled scream, Mal comes.

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It's a gusher. Thick, ropy gouts of sperm shoot straight into the air. They rise to a height of seven feet or more before tumbling back upon themselves to fall plopping into the Jacuzzi water. Janice checks her hair for errant strands, but doesn't find anything.

"Wow, that was quite a show you put on there," she says. "They should put you in the circus."

A tingling sense of hollowness has already left Mal limp. "That was the best orgasm I've had in years," he says, searching his mind for a compliment. That wasn't quite enough. "You're such an incredibly sexy babe," he tries again, thinking: *Now that's more like it...* "I hope we can meet up again later for a rematch."

"We'll see, buddy boy..." Janice says as she slips back into her bikini top. "Let's just make sure we don't get caught this time, okay?"

Mal hears the sliding glass door rolling back along its tracks. He ducks down low in the Jacuzzi and stuffs himself back into his swimsuit as Stan and Cynthia walk out onto the patio. Stan is wearing a pair of Mal's khaki shorts. They're both laughing.

"Where do you think they've been this whole time?" he asks Janice.

"Probably getting it on in the shower," she says, matter-of-factly. "Stan likes clean sex."

Before Mal can get his mind around the idea of his wife committing adultery (*That raging slut!*), Cynthia shouts: "Hey, you guys! Want some dessert? We've got homemade blackberry cobbler with ice cream here."

Mal explains to Janice that he baked the cobbler himself a few days ago. "It's good," he tells her. "We should probably have some. It might help sober us up."

"Sounds great," Janice says, getting out of the water, dripping, "but I'm fine with being drunk."

They both walk over to the umbrella-shaded patio table, where Cynthia and Stan have set out ice cream bowls and the cobbler. Mal sits down heavily in one of the outdoor chairs. He puts a leg up across his knee and is about to ask Cynthia where she put the ice cream when he sees the big wad of jism clinging to the hair on his left ankle. It's a hot glob of man chowder in the shape of a single exponentially

magnified spermatozoon. It couldn't be any more obvious, sitting there like a snake basking in sunshine, shimmering with a pearly gleam. *Dang*, thinks Mal, *that's a heck of a lot of spunk!* It must have been floating on top of the water in the Jacuzzi and gotten stuck to him as he was climbing out.

Mal quickly puts both feet back on the ground and swings his legs under the table. He's panicking now. *How can I get rid of this?* he's thinking. *If anyone sees it, they'll know I was fooling around with Janice. Stan will probably kill me—or Cynthia will cut my dick off.* He looks around for a napkin, hoping he can wipe away the evidence without drawing attention to himself.

"Oh, darn! Mal, I forgot the ice cream," Cynthia says. "Can you go get it?"

"Do we even need it?" Mal asks, stalling for time. He'll be busted for sure if he gets up. *Where are the damn napkins?*

"Of course we need it, you silly-billy. And bring out some paper towels while you're at it. We ran out of napkins."

With a sick churning in the pit of his stomach, Mal starts to get up. But then he pauses—with a mixture of repulsion and relief—when he hears the fairy bell tinkling of Sam's dog collar under the table. He feels her wet nose graze against his shin. Soon she's licking away at his ankle, removing all signs of his transgression, making Mal feel... well, how *does* he feel?

Not reborn, exactly. Certainly not absolved of sin. But at least he feels like he's going to get away with it this time—thanks to man's best friend.



Four weeks later, Gordon finds himself cast adrift in the murky green aquarium dimness inside Lost Weekend Liquors, the store his father owns with Sammy Beaufont. He's off by himself because the two men are having an argument—something about receipts and the lease. Gordon can't make out what they're saying exactly, standing as he is behind the thick glass door of the refrigerated wine vault. He can, however, see Sammy gesticulating wildly from behind the antique cash

register on the mahogany desk near the front entrance. Sammy pauses from his outburst only long enough to unscrew the lid from a brown vitamin jar full of capsules containing dried seaweed, herbal extracts, and essential minerals. He's told Gordon he eats the pills instead of food (tossing them back with great gulps of zinfandel), claiming they'll keep him young and vital. So far the plan doesn't seem to be working. Sammy is a short, fat man with bruised lizard skin bags under his eyes, a huge bony nose, and unruly black hair. He resembles no one so much as that famed ukulele-playing weirdo who's always on television singing "Tip-Toe Through The Tulips." Tiny Tim.

Gordon turns his attention to the wine bottles stacked like torpedoes in their neat wooden racks. He doesn't know much about wine and has only vague notions of why such snobbery seems to be associated with the act of drinking it. Some of the bottles go for four hundred dollars or more. His father has bragged that he and Sammy have the best wine inventory in all of Fresno County. But Gordon wonders if there are enough wine connoisseurs in Fresno to keep the liquor store financially sound. Probably not, going by the snippets he's heard from Mal and Sammy's argument.

Stepping out of the wine vault, Gordon wanders the aisles toward the rear of the store, looking at all the upright liquor bottles in their myriad poisonous colors and forms. He can hear Sammy now, braying, "I don't know what you want from me! Should I wear a sign and walk up and down the highway? Maybe I could play the kazoo or dance an Irish jig!" Mal says something back to him in a low tone, too quiet to be heard.

With no real experience of drinking alcoholic beverages, Gordon finds himself drawn to certain brands for purely aesthetic reasons. He likes the squat green roundness of the Tanqueray gin bottles and the somehow quintessentially Russian design of the Stolichnaya vodka labels. He imagines himself having his own fully stocked bar when he's older, living in a modern bachelor pad, where he debonairly mixes drinks for nubile airline stewardesses and Communist nymphomaniacs like a young James Bond. Gordon makes a mental note to himself to learn how to drive a rocket-launching Aston-Martin. And an airplane and a speedboat while he's at it, for quick getaways. His father could help him out there....

It occurs to Gordon that perhaps James Bond is more his father's ideal of masculinity, rather than his own. Maybe he's identifying with Mal a little too strongly these days because of all that Prednisone he's been taking. The role of the suave spy who speeds around in sleek vehicles saving the world while having sex all the time fits Mal much better than it does Gordon, whose heroes have tended to be grumpy old wizards like Hermann Hesse and Carl Jung. However, there was a time when he was younger—around five or six—when Gordon's daydreams cast him in a more heroic light.

Gordon recalls how he used to entertain fantasies of himself as an athletic teen hippie boy named Starhawk. Starhawk wore round-toed red leather boots and a pair of red underpants on the outside of his perfectly faded denim jeans. He also wore a magic denim jacket (embroidered with flowers and peace symbols) that possessed powers of invisibility, and he had a special pair of red, titanium-mesh gloves with which he could catch speeding bullets. His reflexes were so fast, in fact, that he once caught 63 bullets fired at him from the Tommy gun of the Schnozz Marauder—a villain based on Gordon's wholly inexplicable childhood fear of the big-nosed vaudeville entertainer, Jimmy Durante. Starhawk's confrontations with the Schnozz Marauder were often witnessed by a gorgeous, high-strung hippie girl with wavy blonde hair and a buxom body encased in sky blue tights—a girl whom Gordon, in his fantasies, referred to as Sis. To Gordon's way of thinking at the time (the early 1970's), calling someone Sis was the height of cool, and it didn't necessarily mean they were related. Thus, after Starhawk defeated the Schnozz Marauder by grabbing the empty Tommy gun and bending it into a pretzel with his fists, he turned to the near-swooning hippie girl and said in his cool guy voice: "C'mon, Sis, let's get out of here." A snow-white unicorn with a silky mane suddenly appeared at Starhawk's side and he gallantly helped Sis onto its bare back. Then they both galloped away toward more virtuous hippie adventures with Sis' arms tightly encircling Starhawk's chest and her head resting upon his shoulder, where she could nuzzle his ear and whisper, "Wow, Starhawk, that was, like, so cool! I can't believe how strong and groovy you are! I dig you so much!"

Thinking about that particular fantasy now, Gordon would be inclined to identify Sis as his anima and the Schnozz Marauder as his

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yet-to-be-integrated shadow—but still, the whole thing strikes him as embarrassing in the extreme. Maybe James Bond isn't such a bad role model, after all.

"Gordon! Let's get going!" Mal shouts to him from across the store.

Startled, Gordon almost crashes into a rotating wire rack full of greeting cards celebrating the wisdom and hilarity of alcoholism and unchecked satyriasis. He quickly regains his equilibrium and heads toward the front of the store. Mal is already out in the parking lot. Sammy remains behind the mahogany desk, popping more seaweed capsules into his mouth and swilling from a crystal goblet brimming with wine. He gives Gordon a look of mock-exasperation and sighs, "Tell your father he needs more B-vitamins in his diet. And if anybody would listen to your old Uncle Sammy, I'd say it was time you got sent to bed with an airline stewardess. What do you say? Isn't that right, Gordy?"

"Um, right!" says Gordon, thinking, *God, what is he, a mind reader?*

"Wine, women, and song!" Sammy says, hoisting his glass. "Nothing else in life matters."

"Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll," says Gordon, raising his fist in solidarity. And then he's outside in the parking lot with his father.

"What was all that crap about?" Mal asks him as they walk to the car.

"Just Sammy being Sammy...."

"Never put an alcoholic in charge of a liquor store," Mal says, as if Gordon might be in danger of making just such a business error in the near future. Then he unlocks the Pinto and eases himself into the broken driver's seat with a theatrical groan.

On the drive back to Kingsburg, Mal asks Gordon if he wants to stop by the airport for a quick flight in the Cessna. Remembering his vow to learn how to drive and fly, Gordon decides the time is right to press his father for flying instructions.

"Will you teach me how to fly today?" Gordon asks him.

"Sure, I'll let you hold the co-pilot's wheel, like always."

"No, I mean really teach me. So I can start flying lessons this year."

“Who said anything about flying lessons?”

“Grandma told me that Grandpa paid for your lessons starting when you turned thirteen.”

“She did?”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I was hoping you’d let me do the same thing.” Gordon can sense his father’s resistance to the idea. “What? Don’t you want me to learn?”

“I’m not saying that. I just don’t think you’re ready yet.” Mal pretends to be paying more attention to the road than usual.

“Why not? You did it at my age. And I’ll bet I could pass the written part of the pilot’s exam, no problem.”

“I’m sure you could, too.” There’s no use arguing with him there. Gordon has an almost photographic memory at this point in his life. He’s proven it by having Mal and Cynthia read out loud from any random page in any book in the house while keeping it concealed from him. Usually by the second or third sentence, Gordon can tell them the book’s title and author and even the sentence’s approximate location on the page—and also what comes after it. He’s never wrong. “That’s not the issue,” says Mal.

“So what is it then?” Gordon asks. His voice rises a notch. “Why can’t I take flying lessons?”

“Look at you!” Mal says, suddenly furious. “You’re still just a shrimp! When I was your age I was almost six feet tall. And one heck of a lot more mature.”

Gordon feels as if he’s just been slapped. His father is angrier with him than he’s ever seen him before. And—aside from some possible fallout from the argument with Sammy—Gordon has no idea why.

“I just thought I’d ask...” Gordon says, backpedaling.

“Look, you may be book-smart, but that doesn’t mean you have good judgment—or even common sense.”

Mal’s fury has Gordon spooked. “Why are you getting so mad?” he asks.

The Pinto is now traveling at more than eighty miles per hour, a speed at which it begins to shudder with harmonic vibrations. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Mal reaches into the back seat and

rummages around in the pile of crumpled Dairy Queen bags and soiled blueprints. He comes up with a magazine that Gordon recognizes from Mr. Olsen's journalism class. It's the scholastic edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the most recent issue. Suddenly, Gordon knows why his father is upset. A queasy sensation slams into his body like a wave of cold, slimy water—Mal's disappointment in him is that palpable.

Shaking the folded magazine at the side of Gordon's head, Mal says with brutal vehemence, "What you did was so... *asinine!*"

A photograph of Gordon (pre-Prednisone) is on the magazine's back cover, along with a reprint of his two-part editorial crusade against his school's dress code policy—starting with Amanda Erickson's suspension from school for wearing the wrong T-shirt and ending with Gordon's confrontation with Sergeant Garcia in Mr. Witzkowski's office. It's there because Gordon has been singled out as the winner of the *Columbia Journalism Review's* Annual Scholastic Journalism Award.

"How many people have read this, do you think?"

"Not many," Gordon says. "It just goes around to the schools."

"*The Columbia Journalism Review?*" Mal is livid. "Important people in New York read this magazine! I'll bet Norman Mailer reads this magazine!"

"It's not that big a deal. Really."

But in a way, it *is* a big deal. When Mr. Olsen congratulated Gordon six weeks ago for being the youngest student to ever win the award, he told Gordon that it all but guaranteed he would get into any college of his choice, including Harvard, provided he kept his grades up in high school.

"Norman Mailer could be reading right this minute that my jackass son thinks he was raised by wolves!"

There it is. The reason for Mal's fury. The joke that has suddenly come back to haunt Gordon. A joke written because, for some reason, he just couldn't take the honor seriously.

The editorials were written in Gordon's usual, joking style ("*Sanctimonious Fishman Gropes One of Our Fair Students*" etc.) and when the *Columbia Journalism Review* asked for a short bio to go along with the

award's announcement in their pages, Gordon gave them something written in the same general tone. In other words, he pushed his small town observations toward absurdity to make his life seem more interesting. And then he told an obvious, outrageous lie with that crack about being raised by wolves like Remus and his brother. But in his defense, Gordon felt that telling the world he had been suckled by a she-wolf contained a kind of poetic truth about what it was like to be raised by Cynthia Swannson in Kingsburg, California—a truth that straightforward journalism would always miss.

Gordon wants to tell his father about all this, but he's so overcome with panic and nausea that he can't think of a way to begin.

"You make me so embarrassed!" Mal rants. "You're such a pompous little know-it-all! And look at you now, with your fat chipmunk cheeks and those stupid feathered bangs with all that hairspray! It looks like you've got something shellacked to your frickin' forehead!"

Gordon has recently begun parting his hair down the middle and feathering it back on the sides in a lame imitation of Andy Gibb, the singing teen heartthrob all the girls in his class are going wild about this year. He's been fortifying the look with his mother's spray cans of Aqua-Net—probably too much of it, Gordon realizes now, as he touches the side of his head furthest from Mal and finds he can lift all the hair there in one stiff piece like a desiccated falcon's wing.

"I was planning on taking you to Fathers and Sons Night at the Hoo-Hoo Club next month, but now I'm afraid you'll just make me look bad...." Mal's narrowed eyes are sending out X-rays of hatred from behind his thick, black-framed glasses. Gordon pushes back in his seat. "I'm already Chief Scrivenoter and there's a good chance I'll be made Snark of the Universe next year—but not if you go screwing it up for me. I'll never hear the end of it from those guys if they find out I've got an ass-cheeked ding-a-ling like you for a son!"

If the Pinto weren't traveling at over eighty miles an hour, Gordon would have opened the door and rolled out of it by now. He doesn't say anything to defend himself. His soul just sinks deeper and deeper into an interior monologue. He blames himself for not being the kind of son his father can take pride in. He wonders how things might have been different. A little flame of indignation flares in him when he

thinks that life is hard enough—a father should defend his son against the world’s cruelty, not rain more blows down on him—but then Gordon thinks of all the idiotic things he’s said and done... and the little flame gutters.

Maybe he deserves whatever insults his father has in store for him. His heart yearns for a father would gladly stand behind him and school him in the ways of the world (*he feels so alone, so ignorant—like everyone knows more than he does*), but he can completely understand Mal’s disappointment. Gordon has never fit in very well with his father’s conception of an All-American boyhood: football games, Boy Scout camp, barbecues, and go-kart races. At the Hoo-Hoo Club’s Fathers and Sons Night next month some favorite son will be chosen to undergo the ritual of the Entered Apprentice—and thereby become an honorary member of the Hoo-Hoo Club—but that favorite son won’t ever be Gordon. Not in a million years.

“The off-ramp to the airport is coming up,” Mal says grimly. “Now do you want to go flying or not?”

“I guess not. I don’t feel like it today,” Gordon says.

“How come? You’re not scared because of that DC-10 crash last week, are you?”

It’s been all over the news. A DC-10 crashed just after take-off from Chicago, killing 272 people. It’s being called the worst aviation disaster in American history.

“I just don’t feel like it,” Gordon says. “That’s all.”

“Fine,” says Mal, “then I’ll take you to the lumberyard and put you to work. But I’m going flying, anyway.”

“Go ahead,” says Gordon.

For some reason, it seems as if Mal is putting Gordon’s status as his son up for grabs when he says: “If you don’t want to go with me, I’ll just find somebody else.”



Back at the lumberyard, Mal stalks out to the nail shed with the soles of his big shoes grinding gravel. Gordon wordlessly trails behind him—head down, humiliated—like a battered duckling. Under the

shed's galvanized tin roof, Mike Shriver sits on a nail keg smoking a cigarette while Johnny Hoss, out in the hot sun, picks up a two-ton air conditioner with the diesel-belching forklift and loads it onto a nearby flatbed truck. Mike stands up and tries to look busy when he sees Mal approaching.

"Hey, Big Daddy!" Mike waves to Mal with a crooked grin. "I thought you were taking the day off."

"I need a new flying partner," Mal says, looking scornfully at Gordon. "This one chickened out on me."

"What's wrong, Gordo? That crash in Chicago got you spooked?"

"I just don't feel like flying today..." Gordon says. He's not about to explain himself to that suck-ass, Mike, of all people.

"So how 'bout it?" Mal says, faking a jovial attitude. "You up for a trip into the wild blue yonder?"

"You bet I am!" Mike says, slapping the side of his dusty overalls. "Hot dang! I'm right there with you, big guy! Let's go!"

Mal puts Gordon to work, as promised, ordering him to sweep the floor of the nail shed and sort all the nails he finds there into their respective bins. It's busywork and they both know it. There are hundreds—if not thousands—of loose nails on the floor, in scores of shapes and sizes. After his father turns his back on him with an angry "Hop to it!" and walks off with Mike, Gordon leans on a push broom, then goes slack with despondency as he sizes up the task. He's convinced it will take days.

After twenty minutes of morose sweeping, Gordon finds himself with a mound of nails big enough to fill a wheelbarrow. He starts the mundane task of sorting them into their proper bins one by one. It doesn't go quickly enough. He sits down cross-legged and sorts the big pile into smaller piles of matching nails on the floor in front of him. Still not quick enough.... His mind starts to drift. He reaches into the spiky metal pile too fast and gets a wicked jab on the middle fingertip of his right hand. He yanks it back and puts the wounded finger in his mouth, tasting blood. When he takes it out, he sees an inflamed pink gouge running underneath his fingernail. It stings and throbs. He squeezes the tip of his finger and it bleeds copiously, dribbling fat red spatters onto the dirty concrete.

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For a moment, Gordon thinks of his body as a kind of bedraggled pet. He feels great sympathy for it. It's a pity he hasn't been able to take better care of it. He wonders if he should get his body a tetanus shot.

"No job is done till you shed a little blood," Johnny Hoss says, walking up behind him. "My daddy used to say that."

"I guess I'm done then," Gordon says, wiping his bloody finger on the cuff of his pants.

"Course, my daddy whipped us till we bled if we didn't do our chores—so there was blood whether the work got done or not."

"My dad just calls me names," says Gordon. "I guess that's better."

As Gordon uncrosses his stiff legs, Johnny offers a big callused hand to help him up. "Depends on the names, if you ask me," Johnny says.

"Jackass. Asinine. And 'Ass-checked Ding-a-ling.' That one's my new favorite."

Johnny laughs gruffly. "That's a lot of asses you got goin' there! Boy, you musta done somethin' to really piss him off."

Gordon gets on his feet and almost starts laughing, too. "All I did was say I'd been raised by wolves."

"That it?! That ain't so bad."

"Yeah, well... I said it in a national magazine."

Johnny laughs again, uproariously this time. "Yep, I can see how that mighta got your ol' man fired up.... Wolves! Your mama musta *loved* that one!"

"She *is* kind of like a wolf, when you think about it."

"I know! Hell, you don't need to tell me that. I been around her long enough. That ring-tailed bitch'd eat her own young if she had half a chance."

Gordon is weirdly grateful whenever he hears another person confirm that his mother is hostile and crazed. It reminds him that it's not all in his head. For years now, his friends have been telling him he has the worst mother in town. Prior to that, Gordon had assumed all mothers were like Cynthia—mean-spirited, evil-tongued, and prone to violence. As a child without much first-hand knowledge of the larger

world, he believed the environment he grew up in was perfectly normal. It was a relief to be told otherwise. At least there was hope for others, if not for him.

"It's not so bad that my mom hates me," Gordon tells Johnny. "She's acted that way my whole life, so it's no big deal.... But now my dad's kind of acting that way, too. And that kind of bugs me."

"Yeah, I seen he's got you on his shit list today. Wants you to sort all them nails one-by-one, huh?" Johnny raises his bushy brown eyebrows, then gives Gordon a wink. "I got an idea for ya. Y'know how customers always come in here wantin' to buy a whole bunch of different nails all at once?"

"I never noticed that before," Gordon says honestly.

"Well, they do..." Johnny assures him. "Now... what if we had us a bin fulla all these mixed-up nails here and we sold 'em all for one low price, by the pound." He pulls out a black felt tip marker from his shirt pocket and writes the word *Assorted* on the front of an empty nail bin. "That'd make a lot of people happy, don'tcha think?"

Gordon is already putting nails into the empty bin by the handful. Smiling, he says, "I think you're a genius. But what if my dad finds out?"

"Well—" pointing to the bin's new designation—"you just tell him an *Ass Sorted* 'em. Tell him I put you up to it. I guarantee he won't say shit about it after that."

"Thanks, Johnny," Gordon says. He feels an overwhelming urge to hug him, but he refrains, knowing that would be unmanly. To his surprise, Johnny grabs Gordon in a rough bear hug and says, "Once you're done there, why don't you and me go have us a beer?"

"Okay!" Gordon nearly yelps. He's never had a beer before, but with Johnny as his guide, he's willing to try anything.



Beer tastes like carbonated water that's been sitting around in a rusty tin can long enough to absorb its essence. It's not until Gordon is midway through his second bottle of Coors—beading with

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condensation from the ice in Johnny's private Igloo cooler—that he begins to realize why people might drink it willingly.

“My head feels like a warm sno-cone,” he tells Johnny. A kind of slow motion tingle is running up and down his limbs. He feels good. Loose. Self-confident.

Johnny laughs and pats Gordon's leg, saying, “You're gettin' a buzz on!”

They've been sitting upstairs on the long, flat table in the framing room for about an hour, surrounded by boxes of single- and double-pane sheets of glass and rolls of thin wire mesh used for window screens. A single 60-watt bulb hanging from a wire in the center of the room provides the only illumination. Gordon has always considered the framing room to be a particularly spooky place, tucked away as it is under the blackened hundred-year-old rafters on the fourth floor of the lumberyard's main building. The stairs leading up to it are so dark they're hard to see. The framing room is bordered on its right by an unlit loft where insulation products are stored: rolls of cotton candy pink fiberglass gone cobwebby with years of accumulated dust. When Gordon was smaller, he used to see monsters in there—once a hairy, hulking Sasquatch, on another occasion, a slithering, shadowy presence with tentacles. To the left of the framing room is an even scarier place. An open doorway leads to a sloped attic room where old ledgers and documents are stored in wooden fruit crates dating back to the 1870's. In the fifth grade, while he was in the framing room cutting a sheet of glass, Gordon thought he heard the devil whispering to him from somewhere in there. Even worse, daring to poke his head through the perpetually darkened doorway a year later, Gordon swore he saw the ghost of an old football player hunched against the far wall, floating two feet above the floor. The apparition looked just like an elongated James Dean in a varsity letterman's jacket from the fifties, only Gordon could see right through him and he glowed. Gordon was convinced then that the ghost meant him harm. But with Johnny Hoss at his side, he feels perfectly safe.

“Here's the deal with your daddy...” Johnny says. “He's not a bad guy. He just settled down too young. Hitched himself to one piece of tail for the rest of his life way before he was ready for it.”

"You mean my mom?" Gordon asks, a little slower on the uptake than usual.

"Damn straight, your mom. You seen their wedding pictures? She might or might not've had a bun in the oven, but man, she was hot!"

"She hardly even looks like the same person," Gordon observes. In his parent's wedding pictures, his mother is slim-figured, blonde, and glamorous—a potential rival for any young movie starlet. It's difficult for Gordon to believe she was once so beautiful, knowing how she looks now.

"Yeah, she lost her looks when you was born," Johnny says, taking a meditative sip of beer. "And I'll bet ol' Mal kind of blames you for that, even though it wasn't your fault none. He just can't help it, y'know?"

"He could tell my mom to do some sit-ups."

"My bet is he can't tell her to do nothin'. Your mama has a mind all her own."

No kidding, thinks Gordon. He's never seen his father ask his mother to do anything, whereas she bosses him around all the time.

"So try lookin' at things from your daddy's side," Johnny says. "Here he's got this mean-ass wife. Her body's all shot to hell and she prob'ly ain't puttin' out much. Then he's got this wheezy, way smart kid—that'd be you—who he don't even half-understand. And now there's a new baby on the way.... Meanwhile, he sees his little brother Gerald out there bangin' all the secretaries and havin' the time of his life. No wonder your ol' man's pissed. He's feelin' like he got the short end of the stick!"

"Y'know, I never thought about it that way before..." says Gordon. The beer is putting him in a mellow, contemplative mood. He should have taken more notice of the competitive relationship between his father and his uncle. They've always seemed to hate each other, and now Gordon is beginning to understand why. What Johnny says is true about Gerald and the secretaries. The latest one, Darla, is a trash-talking, Dr. Pepper guzzling County Fair beauty queen who looks like Farrah Fawcett, only with bigger boobs and pink frosted lips. She's been making regular appearances in Gordon's most recent shower fantasies.

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“What your daddy don’t realize is that your Uncle Gerald’s life ain’t all that great, neither,” Johnny says as he pries open another bottle of Coors and sends the cap whizzing across the room with a snap of his fingers. “Both Gerald and your daddy have to answer to your grandma. *She’s* the one who really runs the show around here. She’s the queen bee and this lumberyard’s the hive they’re both slavin’ away in. She’s got ‘em workin’ twelve and fourteen hours a day, six days a week, and then when they go home, they still can’t stop thinkin’ about it. Me, I just put in my 9-to-5, and then I’m *outta* here.”

“Yeah, but they probably make a lot more money than you,” Gordon points out.

“Money ain’t everything,” Johnny says, tilting back his beer. “You ever notice how rich folks are almost always sorry-assed bastards. And they’re goddam *brutal* to their own kids. That’s why rich kids are mostly screw-ups. Exceptin’ you, of course.”

“I’m a pretty big screw-up, too, if you ask my dad right now.”

“You still worryin’ about that wolf business? Look, forget it.... The reason your daddy got so mad is because he knows there’s some truth to it. Him and his wife can’t get along, him and his brother hate each other, and he’s wishin’ your grandma would just up and die soon. Everybody goes around actin’ all pissed off all the time—it really *is* like growin’ up around a pack of hungry wolves. And your daddy knows it. But he can’t get mad at himself, because that’d mean he might’ve made some bad decisions and then he might have to change things. So instead, he gets mad at you

“Kill the messenger,” says Gordon.

“Right, kill the messenger! Call that fucker an ass-cheeked asinine ding-a-ling!” Johnny roars. Then, more seriously: “Which, by the way, if you ask me, those cheeks of yours are almost back to normal. You’re lookin’ more like your ol’ self again, only taller. Must be a big relief. I didn’t wanna say nothin’ while you were goin’ through it, but for a while there you was lookin’ like the damn Pillsbury Doughboy.”

“I know,” Gordon says. “They had me on pills for my asthma. They’re almost done now.” Saying that makes Gordon aware of a mild tightness in his chest, probably from all the dust in the insulation storage room next door. He takes a hit off his asthma inhaler as a preemptive measure.

“Y’know, I always wondered what that asthma juice is like,” Johnny says, indicating the inhaler. “Mind if I try a puff?”

“Sure. Go ahead.” Gordon tosses the inhaler in Johnny’s lap.

Johnny picks up the inhaler and shakes it, then squirts it into his open mouth as he takes a huge gulp of air. His eyes bug out. He makes a face like he’s just bitten into a sour plum. “Man, that shit’s nasty!” he says, scraping his tongue across the roof of his mouth. “I can’t say I’m breathin’ any better.”

“I don’t think it does much for you if you don’t have asthma.”

“I guess I thought it might give me a big ol’ boner that’d bust through walls like Superman or somethin’.”

“Nope. You just have to turn thirteen for that.” Gordon’s birthday was yesterday. His parents forgot about it—as usual.

“Yeah, thirteen’s a bitch, ain’t it?” Johnny says, looking at Gordon with genuine compassion. “Old enough to be horny all the time, but too young to get much pussy. You must be whackin’ off like a damn fiend.”

Quickly—almost involuntarily—Gordon nods his head.

“It’s nothin’ to be ashamed of. Hell, every guy does it at your age. And it don’t stop there....”

“Yeah, but I worry about it. I mean, I know I won’t go blind or grow hair on my palms or anything, but I’ve been reading the Kabbalah—”

“Wait a second. The *what*?”

“The Kabbalah. It’s sort of the Jewish Bible—only weirder. Anyway, in the Kabbalah they say that if you spill your seed in the wrong way, like by jacking off, it creates monsters. There’s this whole evil supernatural world that reproduces itself by feeding off human sperm. It’s ruled by two demons named Lilith and Samael who come and fuck you in your sleep.”

“Well, Gordon, if that’s true—and I ain’t sayin’ it is—then I must’ve created one hell of a lot of monsters in my day.”

“Me, too. And I’m just getting started.”

“Good thing you’re not Jewish, huh?”

“Yeah. Good thing.”

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Johnny looks at his watch. “Well, it’s just about quittin’ time. Listen, if I were you, I’d walk straight home. Don’t let nobody get too close to you ‘til you gargle with some Listerine. Otherwise they’ll smell the beer on your breath. And while I’m handin’ out advice, you should stop worryin’ about your dick so much. Just do whatever comes natural—but no more’n five or six times a day.” Smiling, he stows away the cooler with their empty beer bottles and heads down the stairs. Gordon follows. “And hey—” Johnny says to him, “next time you see Lilith in your sleep, throw a good one into her for me. I ain’t seen her since I was in the Marines. I kinda miss the old slut.”

“You’ve seen her?” Gordon bleats. He misses a step and has to grab the railing to avoid falling over.

“Jesus Christ, I’m just pullin’ your leg!” Johnny says, patting him on the back. “I guess you got a little drunk.”



A warm spring rain accompanies Gordon on his walk home from the lumberyard. Fat, widely spaced droplets spatter the sidewalk like the blood that dribbled from his finger in the nail shed. His nose is tickled by the smell of wet dirt rising from the asphalt. Still reveling in the happy, numb glow of his beer buzz, Gordon thinks the raindrops feel like the hand of God, petting him. An e.e. cummings poem is probably responsible for that notion. The line he’s thinking of goes:

“nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands”

It’s been a dry year and the lawns in front of the low, stucco-sided ranch houses Gordon passes are the color of toasted Wonder Bread. His father drew the architectural plans for nearly half the homes in this neighborhood. **Swannson Lumber, Inc.** probably supplied ninety percent of the building materials. Gordon wonders what Kingsburg would be like if—like a modern-day George Bailey in “It’s A Wonderful Life”—his father were angel-hustled around an alternative universe in which he’d never existed. Would things be better there, or worse?

Of course, in that alternative universe Gordon wouldn’t exist. *No big loss*, he thinks. Most of the time he wishes he’d never been born, anyway.

But not today. Today he's discovered the magical effects of beer drinking. He has a new reason to live, something more to look forward to than just getting laid. He ponders how one goes about becoming an alcoholic. Next week, he'll check out Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* from the town library.

Why is it, Gordon wonders, that ecstasy and evil are so closely linked when it comes to pleasures of the flesh? Why is it that whenever he does something that feels good, someone comes along to insist that it's bad for him? Even in Gordon's own mind, desire and disgust are never far apart. Almost every time he has an orgasm, a bitter old church lady inside his head peers through her cat's-eye glasses at the resultant blobs of jism—clinging like marrow to the shower walls, pooling in his palm like an oyster's drool, staining a tissue like some spattered albino insect—and she purses her withered lips and says, "*Your body is a temple. Don't defile it.*"

But what if he doesn't defile it? What if he refuses his body every pleasure it hungers for, like some flesh-denying monk living by the Zen mantra, *Want Nothing, Accept Everything*, or some timid Christian so wary of sin that he fears God will damn him to hell just for eating Oreos? What then? Gordon imagines the interior of such a body as the equivalent of the formal living room in his parent's house, which has always been off-limits to him. It's a place of gold shag carpet that shows footprints unless it's brushed a certain way, white silk couches that become permanently stained from the slightest bit of dirt off a rambunctious boy's jeans, and tall orange throne-like chairs so top-heavy that they're always in danger of tipping over and smashing a swag lamp or busting up a fake Grecian urn. Gordon hates that room. It's always seemed pretentious and useless to him, a huge waste of space. His parents rarely use it for entertaining because they're afraid of making a mess. What Gordon would like to do is set Samantha loose in there with a belly full of beer and watch her careen around like a floppy-eared pinball, peeing on everything. It would be a triumph for animal instinct.

The world is a vicious, jealous place where any sense of fun is frowned upon—or so it seems to Gordon today. He can't even make a joke anymore without someone wanting to spit in his face. Those crummy, self-appointed judges of what's acceptable—those self-

righteous critics and snotty put-down artists—they suck the spirit out of everything. But at least Johnny Hoss was able to make him feel less alone and weird. Maybe, if he finds the right friends, everything will turn out okay. In the meantime, he'll try to pay more attention to the simple, good things in life and enjoy what he can.

The cracked and hairy pineapple hide of an old palm tree growing next to the sidewalk captures Gordon's attention. He looks up, marveling at its longevity. His grandfather probably passed by that very tree fifty years ago. In its bird-spattered crown, Gordon hears a mourning dove's sorrowful burble blending with the dwindling patter of rain on this otherwise churchyard still day. *Where are all the people?* Kingsburg is having one of those small town moments when everything seems deserted and bathed in a dusky melancholy.

Late one summer evening last year during just such a moment, Gordon was walking under the long double row of maples forming a canopy over 16th Avenue when he came upon a Junior League brass band practicing on the stage of the band shell in **Olafson Park**. Draping willow trees and huge, blooming rhododendrons mellowed the usual shrillness of the marching tune as it carried across the park's vast, darkling green spaces. John Philip Sousa had never sounded sweeter.

A lawnmower starts up somewhere, distant and muffled as a hornet's nest at the bottom of a dry well. Who would be out mowing their lawn in this weather? But then Gordon realizes it's not a lawnmower, it's the drone of a single-engine plane. He looks above the horizon and sees a red-and-white Cessna cruising low in the ash gray sky, just above the roofs and trees. It's his father's plane, he's almost sure of it. When he thinks of his father up there with Mike, showing him a good time, Gordon feels a slight pang of... what? *Envy? Guilt? Rage? Humiliation?* He'll probably never come up with exactly the right word for it. Whatever it is, it sucks.

Then, remembering his conversation with Johnny, a flood of forgiveness rivers through Gordon. He feels his ribcage loosen as his lungs fill up with silvery air. He can empathize with his father now; he can understand some of his frustrations. There are so many things Gordon wants to tell him. It could be their first man-to-man talk, the start of a new, and deeper, relationship. Gordon feels an almost mystical connection between the two of them. He's brimming over

with a soulful, slobbery sort of garrulousness that he will later recognize as a telltale sign of having drunk too much.

A pinprick of sobriety at the back of Gordon's brain reminds him that he and his father rarely talk about *anything*, much less Mal's secret hurts and fears. So the kind of rapport he's longing for is probably out of the question. But at least Gordon can show his father that all has been forgiven. Raising his hands high above his head, he runs toward the plane, waving.

Something's wrong. The Cessna is flying *too* low, even for his daredevil father. It's heading straight toward him over the roof of the Bigani's pink stucco duplex. Its wings are banked at a crazy, almost 90-degree angle as the plane dives down in an arc. As it passes above Gordon, he reaches up and jumps, thinking he can almost touch the lowest wingtip. He even contemplates, for a drunken instant, the spectacle he would make if he grabbed onto the wing and held on.

And then the wing falls off.

Actually, it's ripped off, torn from the rest of the plane as the power lines across the street catch it and snap with a resounding *Ping! Ping! Ping!* The sound reverberates like a violin struck by a handsaw's taut steel blade. An instant later there's the sound of aluminum tearing—a car crash in slow motion—and then the wing seems to just hang between the power poles, suspended in space. Time slows to a crawl. Gordon can see pink aviation fuel gushing from the top of the severed wing and running in rivulets down its gleaming white paint. Then the whole wing lands, with a thud, in the Hovnanian's front lawn on the corner, next door to Gordon's house. It stands on edge for a moment, then flops down on its side in their gypsum-strewn cactus garden.

The plane flips over like a gunshot bird and the other wing glances off the peaked *faux*-Swedish roof of the Hovnanian's house. That second wing is also ripped away and goes clattering down the slope of the Hovnanian's shingled roof to land in their backyard swimming pool. The plane is now just a shrieking fuselage. Gordon gets a glimpse of two figures through the tinted cockpit windows (*His father? Mike?*). It looks like they're fighting. The fuselage drops low and the sputtering prop crunches into the cinderblock wall at the far end of the Hovnanian's backyard, decimating it. The noise is louder than anything

Gordon has ever experienced, a teeth-grinding screech, a slow explosion, as the plane's belly erupts into aluminum confetti. Still, the battered fuselage somehow remains intact. It hurtles across the alley, flashes past the bottlebrush tree at the side of Gordon's house, and then, spectacularly, makes a jagged hole in the wall where the living room is and disappears inside.

Gordon goes running. There's no smoke, no flames. Almost all of the aviation fuel was left back in the tanks of the detached wings. When he gets to the alley just in front of the hole, he sees odd pink chunks—about the size of campfire marshmallows—clinging to the curb. (His mind, at the time, doesn't register the chunks as human flesh, but it will later.) Also on the curb—in the middle, as if deliberately placed there—is something even stranger. Shiny pink, with teeth, it looks like the lower half of an old man's dentures. Gordon picks the thing up without thinking too much and puts it in his back pocket. Someone might need it.

He walks over to the hole, picking his way across sharp, wavy strips of metal and broken bits of Plexiglas, being careful not to step on any pink marshmallows. It's dark in there—his eyes are adjusted to outdoor light—and Gordon has the sensation of entering a cave where man-eating beasts might lurk. He steps over the broken slats of cedar and chalky hunks of drywall where the wall once stood. There's a smell of motor oil on hot metal, the same smell Gordon always noted in the Cessna's hangar as it was being put away after a flight on the weekend. It's a strange smell for his parents' formal living room.

"Is anybody in here?" Gordon asks. He really hopes this isn't his father's plane in pieces all around him.

It's hard to pick out any one thing from the wreckage, but as his eyes adjust to the dimness what Gordon notices first is one of the white silk couches against the wall to the right of him. An enormous streak of red has been smeared across the gold-flecked wall directly behind it, like some abstract expressionist's tantrum, and where the smear ends, Mike Shriver begins—or what's left of him.

Mike's broken body, still in his blue jumpsuit, is slumped across the back of the couch, but the jumpsuit looks too big on him now—and too lumpy—as if half of him is somehow missing. In fact, an arm and a leg are gone—and also Mike's head. The bloody stump of his

neck rises just above the jumpsuit's collar, still pumping dark spurts of blood into the white silk cushions, which are now mostly red. Even more gruesome, the jumpsuit has been sliced open down the front and the flesh laid bare. Mike's torso has been butterflied, the slick pink and purple of his entrails exposed. As Gordon watches, stunned beyond moving, a length of intestine swims loose—like a fat, wet worm—and goes spooling to the gold shag carpet.

Gordon is torn between running away to call the police and staying there to search for his father. Paternal devotion (and morbid curiosity) wins out. He starts to lift up torn and twisted pieces from the wreckage with shaking hands—a red-and-white door, part of the oxblood vinyl backseat. He's stumbling around in shock now. At the same time, deep within Gordon's brain, a dense tangle of neurons called the amygdala is releasing a torrent of hormones that will sear everything he sees into memories—memories that will later be used to torment him with nightmares, panic attacks, and fits of narcolepsy. The unbearable made unforgettable. His own personal horror show.

Turning over a section of tail rudder propped up in the far corner, Gordon finds Mike's decapitated head. It seems to have smashed into an air conditioning vent like a cannonball. Now it's stuck against the dented metal grate—eyes closed, bloody. It looks too heavy, off by itself like that. Then again, Mike's head always looked too big for the rest of his body.

I wonder where his Benjamin Moore Paint cap went? thinks Gordon.

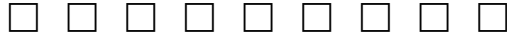
Still no sign of his father. Maybe Mike was flying solo. That would explain a lot. But no, Gordon sees it now.... Skid marks in the foyer, and across that space, in the den, the pilot's chair sits intact on the green carpet like an ejector seat with its back to him. Walking over to it, Gordon feels his whole body shuddering—motor control failing, heartbeat stuttering in anticipation.

Mal is still strapped to the chair. His arms and legs are gone. His shoulder sockets and what's left of his thighs are oozing a pinkish-red jelly. But his head is still there, eyes wide open, staring straight up at Gordon, as if pleading with him. (Years later, when he sees that *Star Wars* episode in which Darth Vader is unmasked, Gordon will think, *That's the same look my dad had on his face.* Like Darth Vader, running out

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of oxygen, finally beaten.) “Oh, dad, I’m so sorry...” Gordon says. But Mal’s not hearing any of it.

He looks thirsty. Maybe that’s because the lower half of his jaw has disappeared. His upper gums are weirdly exposed and his tongue is just hanging there like a flower stamen. Gordon gets the dentures out of his back pocket, suddenly sensing a need for them. He passes out when he sees they’re not dentures at all, but his father’s real teeth.



Gordon didn’t just pass out. His brain suddenly clicked over into full-blown REM sleep. He’d turned narcoleptic, like his dumb basset hound. Blame it on post-traumatic stress or whatever—there was no real cure for it. From that point on, whenever he got too excited or scared or horny, there was a chance he’d fall over and dream. The attacks would keep him off-balance all through high school and earn him the nickname that would later make him famous: Crash Gordon.

Gordon’s first narcoleptic dream was kind of interesting—right there in the den beside his dead father. He dreamed Mal was teaching him to fly, but not in an airplane. Not even with wings. All Gordon had to do was stretch his arms at his sides and catch the wind in his fingertips a certain way. Mal showed him how it was done. At first Gordon had to get a running start and jump into the air. He noticed that each jump seemed to last longer and travel further than the last, until he was spending more time aboveground than gravity should have allowed. While he was up there, he experienced a delicate floating sensation. Sometimes, like a spastic Icarus, he panicked or squirmed in the wrong way and he fell back to earth. But then all he had to do was push off the ground with one foot and he bounced back up into the sky again, floating like a balloon. It felt great. Gordon learned to remain calm and feel the breeze in his fingertips, as Mal had shown him. Soon he was actually flying, like a bird riding the wind currents. Mal was up there with him, a Daddy Dadaelus, doing loop-de-loops and heading too close to the sun. Then something happened and Mal melted. Gordon woke up bereft.

It’s tough when you wake up and see your splattered dad sitting next to you. By then the sirens from the police cars and fire trucks could be heard approaching. Gordon and his father didn’t have much time left to be alone together. Gordon said a little prayer for him, a sort of thank you and

farewell. He reminded Mal to head toward the Light. His father was an atheist, so far as Gordon knew. Maybe he could use a little reminding.

But Mal was just fine. He'd planned the whole thing out that way long ago, before he was even born. His death would become the central mystery of Gordon's existence, but for Mal there was no mystery at all. For Mal it was just, "Mission accomplished. And now, thank God, I can go home."

See, here's the thing about death: we're all suicides, in a sense. We all plot the course of our lives before we incarnate, and along that course we always designate the exit points. Most lives have more than one.

So say you're driving along Highway 1 through Big Sur in a neat little sports car and some cutesy-pie woodland creature darts out in front of you, maybe a self-absorbed raccoon. You swerve to avoid hitting it. The car skids, the front bumper clips a guardrail, the steering wheel wrenches hard to one side. Then something goes horribly wrong. You find yourself airborne, somersaulting through clear blue sky, tumbling down an iceplant-covered embankment. A rocky shore at low tide fills the windshield. It shatters in your face. You've arrived at your self-designated exit point. Every task you've set for yourself has been accomplished—or attempted and botched.

Or maybe not. Maybe there's still more for you to do. So you run right over that raccoon and keep going: heading to New York, getting married, writing books, adopting two beautiful, laughing baby girls from China.... It could be anything. The main thing is, you don't look back. If you pass one exit point, there's always another one further up the road. Every human body is like an unlaunched rocket, waiting to hurtle you through death to the Other Side.

Be grateful for that. We all need an escape plan. Because incarnating in this world is like a descent into hell. Those of us from the Other Side only do it because we love you. It's almost embarrassing to admit, but that's the big, sappy secret:

The dead love you.

Take Mal, for instance. Sure, he was just a half-assed dad while he was still alive. He barely would've known Gordon existed, if it hadn't been for the doctors' bills. He had his own problems. And that's just the point: life on Earth is so full of cruel pressures that almost everyone ends up a little damaged. No one escapes, really. Some totally cave in—they howl and prance and slay, committing acts of depravity wherever they go, so the world can see them for the demented souls they've truly become. Others, more cunning,

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might command acts far more heinous in the name of God or democracy. But absolutely everyone is in the same trap—the high school janitor and the secretary of state, Presidents of great nations and run-of-the-mill schizophrenics, stay-at-home moms and Islamic terrorists. Only when they die do they figure out, as Mal realized, that we're all one. Every single thing in the whole universe—and beyond—is interconnected. No one can be at peace until we're all at peace. And that realization creates an enormous sense of compassion in the newly departed for those still left behind on Earth. Or let's just call it what it really is: love. The dead love you. God loves you (whatever your conception of God might be). You are loved, in spite of everything. Get that through your head. It's important.

Often, it's the newly dead who end up taking the biggest risks for those they've left behind. Any spirit or guardian angel can intervene on behalf of the living to make their lives a little better, but for the most part, the longer the dead stay on the Other Side, the more conservative they tend to get. Like I've said, it's nice there. The (non-)living is easy. They start to think like slaves under a kind new master, worried they'll be sold back to humanity. So they end up doing nothing—trying to shove the turmoil of man's world out of their thoughts, deliberately forgetting how bad things are down there. Which is why most guardian angels are kind of crappy. And why you'll find, in the lives of the famous or exceedingly fortunate, that they also saw a lot of tragedy—a lot of people died around them. Fame or good fortune usually requires a blood sacrifice. It's not witchcraft. It's just life—and the brand-new opposite of life, doing what it can to provide.

The biggest risk, of course—the greatest act of love—is to incarnate again to help others. Some souls get lost on Earth. They forget they're eternal and sometimes they can't find their way home again. Sometimes, they forget the love of God—who is, admittedly, not without His terrors. Although fear and suffering are necessary for spiritual growth (I'll explain that one later), sometimes enough is enough. At a certain point, there's only one thing left to do. It's what I'm about to do, on July 13th, 1979 (A Friday, of course. Friday the 13th. I can't seem to catch a break): you put on one of those ridiculous human suits and you get down to business.

Just before I'm born, an angel will put a finger to my lips and make me forget everything I've told you. I know why they do that now. It's for my own good. If I could remember all I know about the Other Side while I was stuck in a puny human body, it would drive me absolutely fucking nuts. But

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hopefully I'll remember a little something, like Gordon, so I won't be totally clueless, either.

Gordon's daimon is watching out for us both, which makes me feel better. It's always a little nerve-racking when you're as close to incarnating again as I am. But don't worry about me. I can still see the past and the future from right here, remember? I know things will turn out pretty much the way they've been planned (that doesn't mean it'll be easy). I'll still be able to comment on the action from my little newsvomb even after I'm hauled out of Cynthia's stretch-marked old belly (she's having a Cesarean, did I tell you?). A few things have to happen before I arrive—John Wayne has to die and Skylab has to scatter itself across parts of Australia and the Indian Ocean—but then some overworked doctor will be yanking me upside-down by my bloody ankles.

Wish me luck. Like everyone else on Earth, I'll be needing it.

ALL IS VANITY

Everyone has a theory about Mal's plane crash. The first theory is voiced by aging but still vain Mrs. Bigani, who emerges from her pink stucco duplex just as the fire trucks are pulling up across the street at the Swannsons' damaged house. She walks over to get a closer look in a pair of Dr. Scholl's flip-flops and a begonia-dappled silk kimono that barely covers her crotch. She had the forethought to bring along her old Polaroid Swinger to document the wreckage, but underneath the robe she's still wearing the same bedraggled peach and mauve string bikini that she had on while she was sunbathing in her backyard. As a team of firemen escorts Gordon back out through the hole in the living room wall, Mrs. Bigani—smelling strongly of gin and cocoa butter—hysterically confesses to them: "I know what happened. In a way, it's even my fault!" When they ask her to explain, she says, "I was trying to get a tan with my top off in my backyard—only I was getting rained out—and then this pervert started flying around too low, trying to get a look at my you-know-whats." Mrs. Bigani doesn't know yet that it was her pervy good neighbor, Mal, who was flying the plane. Gordon, though still in shock, is fairly certain she's arrived at the wrong conclusion, anyhow. Mrs. Bigani is a shrill, rabbitty woman with pancake-flat breasts and Gordon knows from his father's choice in magazines that it's unlikely he would have had any interest in her at all.

Mechanical failure, pilot error, exhaust fumes leaking into the cabin, thermal downdrafts in combination with rogue winds—everyone has theory, but no one has any definitive answers. Johnny Hoss comes up with one of the more plausible scenarios. When he and Gordon get together again just before the funeral to talk over a few

beers, Johnny suggests that Mike and Mal might have gotten into a fight and wrestled for the plane's controls. Gordon has no trouble with that theory. Both he and Johnny still believe it was Mike who bit Mal's leg on the night of the Hoo-Hoo Club initiation all those years ago. Mal had treated Mike like a surrogate son, so Gordon speculates that Mike might have had an Oedipal complex and thus an unconscious wish to kill his father—or in this case, Gordon's father. But then did it follow (and here the mind boggled) that Mike had also wanted to screw Gordon's mother? Sigmund Freud's dark, puppet-string-pulling vision of human sexuality always ended up giving Gordon the creeps. He'd take Carl Jung—or even that orgone-box-building maniac, Wilhelm Reich—over Freud, any day. Or so he tells Johnny, who goes on to wonder out loud if Mike, or even *Mal*, had been suicidal.

No answers are forthcoming. The Fresno County Coroner's inquest finds no trace of drugs or alcohol in Mal's bloodstream and no clues as to why he might have piloted a plane directly into his own house. The Kingsburg Police Department's report is similarly inconclusive. No one seems to know enough.

Maybe Gordon will never know enough. Not just about the plane crash, but about life in general—especially now that he doesn't have a father to guide him and watch his back in the world. He can't stop thinking about his father's anger on the way home from the liquor store, especially his pronouncement (practically his last words): "You may be book-smart, but that doesn't mean you have good judgment—or even common sense." Did his father always secretly dislike him? Resent him for being a sickly, skinny-necked Mister Know-It-All, the runt of the litter, a kid who didn't have enough sense to breathe right, but could read at a college level by the time he was five? Maybe Mal had wanted him to die.

It makes a certain amount of sense. Gordon thinks about how close that lowered wing came to hitting him. Could he have been the real target all along? The more he thinks about it, the more it seems possible. Gordon had always thought his mother was the one who had it in for him, but maybe his father's ill will ran deeper. He remembers a conversation he once had with his father, in which the merits of having children were compared with owning a basset hound such as Sam: "Sam's a lot better," Mal said, only half-joking. "She comes when I call

her, she doesn't talk back, and even after I kick her, she'll still turn right around and lick my hand."

Gordon failed on all those counts. He couldn't help but think that he'd failed as a son, period. It's becoming increasingly clear to him that Mal thought he'd deserved better. And now that he's gone there will be no squaring it with him. No matter how glorious his future accomplishments, there's nothing Gordon can do that will ever make Mal say he's proud to be his father. Shame and self-consciousness will be his legacy. The voice of Mal inside Gordon's head will forever be rendered as a critical, competitive, displeased ghost.

A ghost—a disembodied soul—is how Gordon pictures his father whenever he thinks of the plane crash, which is often. In his mind's eye he sees the Cessna roar over Mrs. Bigani's rooftop, watches the lowered wing clip the power lines and the plane begin to disintegrate all over again. But then Gordon's imagination takes over, altering the course of actual events. Somehow the sky unfolds and a pinkish-orange cloud breathes Mal in. While Mal's body remains strapped to the pilot's seat—just a puppet made of meat now, jerking around in the plummeting cockpit—his soul is whisked outside the plane to stand in the cumulus' vapor like a half-transparent faith healer (or newly paroled ex-con) waiting for a bus in heavy fog.

Mal's soul watches without anxiety—and without the usual Clark Kent glasses—as the plane's fuselage glances off the Hovnanian's roof, crashes through their cinder-block wall, then tears through the living room of the house he designed and built himself. Down in the street, he watches his son watching it all happen, thunderstruck. Mal's soul shapes his vaporous face into an expression of piety and petulance as a pair of mottled downy wings sprouts from between his shoulder blades. He launches himself into the sky like a hebephrenic owl, taking one last, pitying look at the world between his dangling legs. He must be having his final thoughts as he starts to flap his way toward heaven. Gordon tries to imagine what those thoughts might be:

"Shake 'em, Mrs. Bigani! I loved those hot tits!"

"Damn you, Mike Shriver, you just ruined everything!"

Or is it a kamikaze's lament? *"Die, Gordon, die! I was aiming for you, son, but I missed!"*



Six weeks pass before the Fresno County Coroner's Office releases Mal's body for burial. The funeral takes place on a Friday in mid-July. It's an unusually hot day even for that time of year and on the way to the Kingsburg United Methodist Church for the memorial service Gordon finds himself wondering how fast his father's flesh will thaw out after spending so much time in the morgue's freezer. Will Mal's mortal remains be oozing pink juices inside the coffin like a defrosted slab of beef? Will he start to stink?

Gordon has been elected to be one of the pallbearers, as has his Uncle Gerald and Johnny Hoss. They're joined by Arnie Andersen, Wayne Covington, and a few other high-ranking members of the Hoo-Hoo Club—faces that Gordon recognizes, but isn't able to name. Even with all those hands distributing the weight, Gordon is surprised by how heavy the mahogany coffin feels as they slide it off the back end of the hearse.

"What the hell'd they do, throw half the airplane engine in here along with him?" Johnny jokes, taking the end of the casket. He's hefting more than his share of the weight to make up for Gordon's lack of strength.

"Mal was a big man, in more ways than one," says Arnie. "I heard they wanted to put his prick in a jar and donate it to the Smithsonian so it could sit on the same shelf with Dillinger's."

"You're just making that up," Gerald says, straining.

"Y'think? We all saw the actual goods while Mal was making like a bullfighter at his Hoo-Hoo Club initiation," Arnie recalls. "He could've made a lady rhinoceros beg for mercy with that thing, I swear...."

"He would've made a great Snark of the Universe," says Wayne. "He could've put the Hoo-Hoos back in their rightful place."

All talk ceases as they climb the steps to the chapel and the pipe organ inside sounds the first notes of a funeral dirge. Gordon is glad the other men think so highly of his deceased dad. He's also relieved not to smell anything gamy. They set the coffin on a wheeled table and roll it to the front of the center aisle, where four clergymen in white tunics take over and cover the coffin's lid with a purple satin blanket

embroidered with a golden crucifix. Gordon takes a seat in the front pew between his grandmother, who's weeping copiously, and his mother, stony-eyed in a black maternity gown. Her belly looks ready to burst.

A droning clergyman announces that Reverend Zimmermann will be reading the eulogy, but Gordon mishears the name as Reverend Simperman—an improbable moniker that he will soon find appropriate. A wiry old man with a white halo of hair and a lipless pursed mouth steps up to the microphone in the pulpit and begins:

"Malcolm Albert Swannson has passed from this San Joaquin Valley of woe...."

Oh, give me a break, thinks Gordon, already disliking Reverend Simperman and his folksy way with words.

"I can't say I knew him well," the Reverend continues. "Mal, as he was known to all, was not a religious man. But there are some here who remember him when he was a young go-getter, still in college, who went wooing after the minister's daughter of this very church. Such was the fervor of Mal's ardor, I've been told, that he even attended an occasional Sunday service."

Reverend Simperman gets a chuckle from his audience over that one. Gordon rolls his eyes. He can't imagine his father ever having set foot inside a church, not even for his own wedding.

"Let's hope Jesus got to know him well back then," Reverend Simperman says, stifling a chuckle of his own. "Let's pray Mal and Jesus are walking together in God's paradise right now as we speak. For although Mal might not have been a religious man, by all accounts he was a good man, a prosperous business owner with a zeal for living—"

—and *pornography*, Gordon adds mentally, just to keep things honest.

"—a Won't-Take-No-For-An-Answer kind of man who went on to marry that minister's daughter—dear Cynthia, right here in the front row with us. She and Mal were going on fifteen years of a strong marriage and they produced a fine son together—young Gordon, sitting next to her. And I'm given to understand another baby will soon be on the way."

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

At this, Gordon's grandmother lets loose with a fresh bout of wailing. Her mascara streaks in grief. Reverend Simperman tries to come up with some off-the-cuff words of solace:

"We can't know why God chooses to take a man in the prime of his life, just when it seems he's needed here most as a husband and father. We can only assume that God required Mal for a higher purpose. As you all know, the Lord works in mysterious ways. But I can offer you this: in our day and age of overburdened hospitals and scandal-plagued nursing homes, at least Mal was allowed the comfort and dignity of dying in his own home."

He crashed his plane into his fucking living room, you stupid priest! Gordon wants to shout. At that moment, his Grandma Helen touches his wrist. Her bony hands flutter with tiny spasmodic tremors as she whispers through tears: "You'll have to go up there and read this for me after the Reverend finishes." She awkwardly stuffs a folded square of paper into Gordon's fist. "I can't do it," his grandmother weeps. "Children should never die before their parents."

Gordon smooths the creases from the paper and takes a look at it. It's a Xeroxed excerpt from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. It reads:

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

What was he supposed to make of that? The whole thing kind of pissed Gordon off in a way he could barely articulate. It seemed to him that Paul's version of God was like a neglectful father who abandons his children in a house filled with drugs, booze, and pornography, where their only guardian is a Satanic babysitter ("the ruler of the kingdom of the air") who schools them in every vice imaginable. And then, when one of those errant children naïvely starts "gratifying the cravings" of their sinful nature—a nature which God is responsible for creating in the first place, being omniscient and omnipotent (not to mention having made man in his image)—what, then, does God do? Does he show up to offer his children love and moral guidance, to gently steer them away from the path he so deliberately set them upon? No. Just the opposite, actually. They become "objects of wrath." Objects of God's very own spiteful, all-powerful brand of vengeance, which is so clearly documented in the Old Testament.

But then comes the back-pedaling: God wants his children to love him at the same time that he's punishing them with fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, famine, poverty, pestilence, disease, and anything else he can throw at them. He wants everyone to think he's "rich in mercy"—just as any deadbeat dad secretly believes that if his kids ever got to know him they'd think he was a really swell guy. So God creates a divine son in Jesus Christ, whom he promptly crucifies (another scary object lesson). In doing so, God makes the shaky promise that the sins of his lesser children will somehow be washed away in Christ's blood. Now, thanks to God's savage grace, they'll all be able to sit down with Jesus in the heavenly realms and compare horror stories: "Christ, what was our Father thinking, putting us on that God-forsaken planet. What a fucking nightmare."

Then again, thinks Gordon, you're probably not allowed to say "fuck" in heaven. And you're probably not even supposed to think it while you're in church, as he's done twice already. He must be on the fast track to Hades.

Okay, so maybe he's feeling abandoned by his own father and unconsciously projecting those feelings onto God, the ultimate scapegoat. Or maybe the "incomparable riches" of God's grace have seemed a little lacking in his life just lately. Whatever the reason, Gordon is having a hard time with God today. He just can't

understand why any father—much less the Father of Us All—would want to see his favorite son nailed to a cross moaning, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” What was the point of that, anyway? Was it God’s way of showing his love for mankind? Or his way of saying: “To know Me is to feel forsaken by Me.” That’s the lesson learned by Daniel, Job, and Christ himself, after all. Maybe it’s an inescapable lesson for every person exiled on Earth.

But then Gordon is struck by the uneasy notion that perhaps God only forsakes those who have already forsaken Him. Although he can’t, for the life of him, remember forsaking God (ignoring Him, perhaps, but that’s different...). Maybe he did his forsaking before he was born.

“Honey, it’s time to go up and read,” Gordon’s grandmother says, brushing her bony fingers against his cheek.

Realizing with a start that he’s completely tuned out Father Simperman, Gordon pats his grandmother’s hand and heads up to the pulpit. He can’t in good conscience read Paul’s ranting to the Ephesians now. Instead, he spontaneously decides to replace it with a passage from the Viking Compass Edition of *The Portable Nabokov*, which he was reading earlier in the week. Seeing the words in his mind’s eye just as surely as if he had them on a page in front of him, Gordon steps up to the microphone and announces:

“A reading from the Vladimir Nabokov novel, *Pnin*.”

Gordon looks out at the gathered mourners and sees his mother glaring at him. No one else seems to have noticed the switch. He plunges ahead recklessly, his voice sounding oddly girlish over the P.A. system:

“Pnin slowly walked under the solemn pines. The sky was dying. He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick.”

There.... At least that’s somewhat closer, as a metaphysical statement, to something his father might have found agreeable. A few quips about mortality from Hugh Hefner might have been even better, but Gordon couldn’t recall having read any. Feeling self-conscious in the sudden silence, he steps away from the microphone and returns to

his seat. Gordon's grandmother leans over and kisses him on the forehead, saying, "Thank you, sweetie. You read beautifully." Either she didn't bother to look at what was on the paper when it was handed to her, or in the last few minutes her incipient senility has ramped up considerably. As his Grandma dabs at her reddened eyes with a Kleenex, Gordon's mother crossly jerks his ear and whispers into it: "You'll go to hell for that, you godless little book freak."

I must be in hell already to have you as a mother, Gordon thinks. The memorial service is putting him in a crappy mood. Fortunately, they only have a few more prayers and hymns to get through and then everyone will be dismissed.

After they haul Mal's coffin down the church steps and back into the hearse, Johnny Hoss offers Gordon a ride out to the cemetery in his nine-year-old rust-colored Chevy El Camino. "I got a dual-carb 454 under the hood," Johnny says. "I'll get you there faster'n anybody." Gordon pushes aside a grimy, sawdust-spattered chainsaw on the black leather bench seat and hops right in. He's not about to ask his harpy of a mother for permission. He just gives her a jaunty wave as the El Camino's engine starts up with a throaty rumble and they peel out from the church's parking lot.

"That preacher was puttin' me to sleep," Johnny says as they turn onto Draper Street and blow past the faux-Swedish storefronts. The growl of the El Camino's exhaust pipes drowns out the polka music on the sidewalks and causes a few withered old ladies to look up from their walkers and stare like dismayed herons.

"I can't believe all this time's passed and they still don't know how my dad died," Gordon says, recalling the episode six or seven years ago when his father took him up in the Cessna and buzzed Draper Street, then nearly killed them both in the airport's lake. *Maybe he finally just screwed up and crashed*, Gordon thinks, but he still has his doubts.

"I guess some things are meant to stay mysteries," says Johnny.

"How do you mean?" Gordon asks as they bump across the railroad tracks at the far end of town. A cinderblock overturns with a sandy clunk behind them in the pickup's scratched steel bed.

"Just what I was sayin'. Sometimes a mystery is supposed to stay a mystery. That way it can mean different things to you at different times in your life."

“Like God,” says Gordon.

“Exactly! Ain’t nobody ever gonna figure that sucker out. You wanna understand God, you’re just plum outta luck.”

As they pass by **Ralph’s Radiator Shoppe** and the houses start to give way to grape vineyards out on 10th Avenue, Johnny floors the accelerator and the El Camino picks up speed at a scrotum-tingling rate. Gordon leans over to look at the speedometer and sees the red needle rising from 50 to 70 to 90 in mere seconds. As it scoots past 100, Johnny yells above the thundering engine: “If today was our day to die, I might crash us into a big ol’ cow wanderin’ out here on the road, or some dumb guy on a tractor. But you don’t need to be flyin’ no plane or drivin’ no El Camino like a bat outta hell for that to happen. You can die anytime, even in your sleep. When your time’s up, that’s it. You’re a goner no matter what. And when your time’s *not* up you can get away with damn near anything. At least that’s how I see it.”

The rows of vineyards outside Gordon’s window have become a vivid green blur. He’s regretting now that he wasn’t able to find the El Camino’s seat belts.

“Most folks spend their whole lives all tied up in knots, tryin’ to be safe,” Johnny keeps yelling. “They work at jobs they hate so they can pay for things they don’t really need—and I ain’t just talkin’ life insurance and burglar alarm systems here. They’re all runnin’ around so scared that they think just buyin’ stuff in general will keep death away. Like them plastic Adirondack chairs from K-Mart will keep ‘em alive somehow, know what I mean?”

“I don’t have a clue,” Gordon admits without irony, shouting to be heard. The speedometer’s red needle is floating somewhere between 130 and 140 and almost all of Gordon’s mental energy is directed toward willing it to go back down.

“I’m talkin’ ‘bout security!” Johnny hollers. “There is none! No stocks or bonds or insurance policies can protect you from the hairy fist of fate—much less havin’ fancy new clothes or the right kind of silverware. It don’t matter how good a neighborhood you live in, or who you get married to, shit’s still gonna happen that you never saw comin’. So why make yourself miserable worryin’ about things you can’t control, anyhow?”

“Look out!” Gordon shouts.

“*Wba?!*” Johnny yelps. He slams on the brakes. The El Camino goes into a long, screeching skid down the old tar road. First it turns sideways and then it goes into a spin. For a moment, Gordon thinks they’re going to flip over and catch on fire, as he’s seen happen so often in movies. But then that moment passes.

“What was that?” Johnny asks when they’ve come to a complete stop, engine flooding, the air smelling strongly of singed brake pads and smoking tires. He cranes his sunburned neck, looking around wildly. “What’d you see?”

“You were about to miss the turn for the cemetery,” Gordon says sheepishly.

Just as Johnny gets the engine started again, Mal’s hearse cruises past them almost silently. They follow it through the cemetery gates and then turn aside to park in the gravel driveway near the mausoleum. When Gordon gets out, he takes a long look at the cemetery’s fence with its row of tall sculpted cypress trees pointing up at the sky like some dark green demon’s fingers, and it finally hits him: *They’re going to put my father in a grave.* Six feet of dirt will be covering Mal’s body. He won’t be coming back—*ever*.

A long black limousine pulls up beside them and Cynthia gets out, wearing her oversized Gucci sunglasses. “Gordon, I want a word with you,” she says, lighting a cigarette. Gordon gives Johnny a helpless shrug, thanks him for the ride, and then reluctantly goes off with her.

“I’m not too happy about that little stunt you pulled with Johnny,” his mother says when they’re some distance away from the mausoleum, “but we can talk about that later. Right now I want to show you something.” She makes a beeline through the tombstones as if she knows exactly where she’s going. She moves fast for a pregnant lady. Gordon has to jog a little to catch up with her.

“There...” she says, coming to a stop and pointing at an old bronze plaque set in black granite at her feet. “Say hello to your grandmother’s old lover.”

The plaque reads: “Maxwell Blaine Olson. Born October 5th, 1897. Died April 17th, 1959.” Nothing more except for a tiny flying angel blowing a trumpet in bas-relief.

“He was a yellow journalist,” Cynthia says, blowing mentholated smoke from her nostrils like an angry cartoon rhino. “They met just

after your grandmother won that contest for the Sunny Maid Raisin Queen—even though she should’ve been disqualified because she was already married. She was such a prima donna. Always wanted to be famous.” His mother winces and lets out a short gasp of air, then bears down harder on her cigarette. Its tip glows a fiery red.

“Anyway,” she says, with added nostril smoke, “Maxwell here came out to the house to do a story on her. He was kind of a charmer. Came off as some kind of big shot writer, like the next Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald. And your dingbat grandmother fell for it. She was so flattered by him that she started going behind your grandfather’s back, letting Maxwell diddle her in his little downtown office. It went on for years. They finally got caught, of course. Some policeman saw them through the blinds and thought it might be rape—probably because she screamed while she had her fake orgasms. I don’t know why, but Milt forgave her. They stayed married and tried not to talk about it. But the upshot is that no one knows for sure who your dad’s real father was. So there’s a chance you could be standing here on top of your dead Grandpa.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Gordon asks her.

“I don’t know. Something about the way your grandmother was carrying on in church today just raised my hackles. She’s still a goddam prima donna. I’m the one who just lost a husband, but do you see me carrying on like it’s all about me? No, that’s her job. She’s always been so dramatic.” She huffs out that last word like a transvestite mimicking Joan Crawford. “But really, she’s just a selfish hypocrite. I guess I’m tired of being the only one who sees through her act.”

It’s the longest speech his mother has ever addressed to him. Gordon wonders if she’s trying to find a way for them to bond. But this is his Grandma Helen she’s talking about, the only adult—aside from Johnny Hoss—who’s been consistently kind to him throughout his young life. There’s also something disingenuous about Cynthia’s assertion that Maxwell Olsen could be his grandfather. His real grandfather, Milt, had distinctively crooked pinkies, and although Mal didn’t manifest that particular genetic trait, it was passed along to Gordon, who did. And his mother knows that.

Gordon says, “Just because Grandma Helen had an affair, that doesn’t mean she’s a bad person. And why shouldn’t she cry? Her

son's dead." If he had just died, Gordon wants to ask her, wouldn't she cry? But he's pretty sure he already knows the answer. She wouldn't shed a single tear.

"If I ever found out your father was having an affair," Cynthia responds with swift vehemence, "I would've wrung his stupid neck." She flicks her cigarette onto Maxell Olson's headstone and grinds it out, leaving a tarry streak against the flying angel's wing.

There's nothing more to say after that. They walk in silence to join the other mourners near Mal's gravesite. Half of Kingsburg seems to be there. As they approach, they see Arnie Andersen wearing bagpipes and two of the other nameless Hoo-Hoos harnessed up with snare drums. A black Weber kettle barbecue has been rolled close to the open grave. A pyramid of charcoal briquettes, freshly doused with kerosene, writhes with flames at the kettle's center.

"Oh, look," says Cynthia. "The Hoo-Hoos are about to salute your father. I was hoping they'd do that." She winces again, as if she's having gas pains.

"What kind of a hokey mystery cult is this?" Gordon asks her. "Are they having a weenie roast?"

"Show some respect," she snaps back at him. "Those men were your father's best friends. You have no idea how much they've already done for us."

Gordon and his mother are led over to some folding chairs set up next to a huge wreath of somber, drooping flowers tied up with a white satin sash. A gilt-edged card reads: "In Deepest Sympathy." The barbecue blazes just across the grave from them. Gordon looks around for hot dogs or hamburger patties, but finds none. A white picnic tent has been set up to prevent the sun from shining on Mal's coffin (*How did that get here? Gordon wonders. Did I miss pallbearer duty?*). A shellacked plywood podium with an attached microphone stands in front of the coffin. Father Simperman asks them all to rise and say a prayer. After that, Wayne Covington steps up to the podium with a few sheets of yellow notepad paper, which he tries to make inconspicuous.

"Hi there, everyone. I just wanted to say a few words today about Mal on behalf of the Hoo-Hoo Club," says Wayne, "which, um, is a brotherhood of lumber merchants that's existed for almost a hundred

years—and before that, even, under different names.” He’s a little nervous. He stares down at his notes, which Gordon can see reflected in Wayne’s gold-rimmed, aviator-style bifocals. “Mal Swannson was a righteous man, a good friend, and a Hoo-Hoo *par excellence*,” Wayne reads with a slight nasal twang. “Had he lived, he surely would’ve been our next Snark of the Universe—” looking up to clarify—“which is kind of like the President, only in some ways more powerful.”

It’s obvious from the way Wayne is reading that he doesn’t have the speech memorized. He sounds like a malfunctioning robot. His ad-libs aren’t helping. He goes back to his notes. “Timber, mining, and oil were the businesses that made this country great, and the Hoo-Hoo Club played a large role in their development. They supplied the lumber to build your homes, while others supplied the copper to provide electricity, the steel to build railroad tracks, and the oil to fuel furnaces and make the gasoline that runs in your cars. Back then, a gentle patriarchy ruled the land, with names you could trust like Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, duPont, Frick, and Morgan. The Hoo-Hoo Club’s Snark of the Universe always held a high rank among these Illuminati. I’m only telling you this now so you can have some idea of the importance of the office Mal was to have held.”

Wow, my dad was right up there with the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts, thinks Gordon. *Is this guy crazy, or what?*

Wayne turns to his second sheet of paper and reads: “Sadly, this gentle patriarchy gave way in our century to the more nefarious corporate hucksters from the greedy media and drug companies. The honorable George Hearst’s son, William Randolph, pioneered the techniques of yellow journalism—” There’s that phrase again, thinks Gordon—“later to be perfected by the Big Three television networks. The German drug manufacturer, Bayer, made us crave headache remedies despite the fact that no one even knew what a headache was in the previous century. And perhaps most malignant of all was the foolishly beloved Walt Disney, whose plan was to brainwash every one of us with the spoken words of his animated animal creations. Now a vast cloud of bamboozlement covers this once-great land, making us dependent on cartoons, game shows, and pharmaceuticals.”

He’s got a point, thinks Gordon, *even though he sounds like a paranoid nutcase.* Television, newspapers, and magazines really *do* seem to act like

a toxic gas, dumbing down the general populace with a smog of triviality. Which is why Gordon has always preferred library books. As for drugs... well, he probably wouldn't be alive without them. In the Darwinian view of natural selection, maybe he shouldn't be. Was that also part of the whole drug company conspiracy—a plot to keep the physically frail alive so they can further degrade the gene pool of the human race? Maybe deep-thinking Wayne has the answers....

Nope. Apparently he's going to skip right past biomedical ethics and move on to the deification of Gordon's dad. "If Mal were with us today," Wayne is saying, "I think he could have single-handedly stemmed the tide of bamboozlement." Gordon wants to raise his hand and ask, "Just what is bamboozlement, Wayne? A cloud or a tide—or is it both, just as light exhibits the characteristics of both particles and waves?" He doesn't get the chance. Plunging ahead quite heedless off his own garbled metaphors, Wayne says, "Mal was a very charismatic guy—as I'm sure you all know—and he could hold his own in a debate with just about anyone, even the King of Spain. Once he said to me, 'Wayne, we should get our butts in gear and return the Hoo-Hoo Club to its former days of glory. People still need houses, but they can get along without Mickey Mouse and *The Price Is Right!*'"

That sounds more like something Wayne would've written than something my dad would've said, but whatever... thinks Gordon.

"Well, anyway, he will be deeply missed by all of us," Wayne concludes. "Not only was he a great husband and father—he was also a powerful and soulful Hoo-Hoo." A little sob catches in Wayne's throat as he dips into the big side pocket of his navy blue belted leisure suit and pulls out a medium-sized rubber iguana. Or at least that's what it looks like. The moment feels charged with significance.

Shaking the rubber iguana above his head like a cudgel, so all the mourners can see, Wayne cries out, "We'll be paying our respects to Mal now with a little ceremony." His voice is cracking. "Each man, when he's initiated into the Hoo-Hoo Club, receives one of these sacred Jabberwocks—which represents the tiny lizardperson who resides in every one of us. This one was Mal's. No other human being is worthy of such a mojo-laden totem, so we're consigning it to the fire at Mal's graveside. I do this now with a heavy heart."

The bagpipes suddenly come to life like a peacock vomiting. The snare drums join in with a solemn stutter as Wayne tosses the flaccid Jabberwock onto the barbecue, where it sizzles like fatty meat, then quickly blackens and starts to melt. The emerging smoke—roiling with black plumed serpents of soot—is blown by a hot wind into the downcast faces of the mourners. The stench of burning plastic makes their eyes and nostrils sting.

Amid the ensuing flurries of hand-fanning and coughing, Father Simperman takes over at the podium. He starts in again with his folksy muttering: “...*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust... He is the resurrection and the life... take Mal to a far, far better place...*” And so on. Gordon barely hears him. He’s more interested in the grim wrestling match taking place between the bagpipes and Arnie Andersen, who looks like he’s trying to squeeze the rigid gizzards out of a tartan-clad Thanksgiving turkey. But then something said by Father Simperman leaps out at Gordon. He recognizes it as a phrase from Ecclesiastes. Somehow, it seems to perfectly sum up the new way that he looks at the world in the aftermath of Mal’s plane crash:

“All is vanity, striving after wind.”

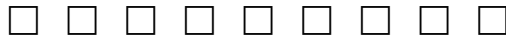
It sounds so catchy to him that he thinks it should be a radio jingle—or at least a popular bumper sticker. He hears T. Rex singing it inside his head—a mantra set to the tune of “Cosmic Dancer”—while Mal’s coffin is loaded onto three green woven straps that hold it suspended over the deep, root-scarred grave. Someone flips a switch and an electric winch begins to whine. The green straps lengthen from a system of pulleys and the coffin begins its descent. When it thumps down on the muddy bottom, Gordon’s mother stands up and lurches forward. Gordon instinctively grabs her before she pitches over. She has a wild, furious look in her eyes, but it’s unfocused. Bearing down on some terrible inner turmoil, she gnashes her teeth and shrieks right into Gordon’s face.

Then she wets herself. Warm rivulets of fluid splash onto Gordon’s shiny shoes and the black polyester slacks covering his skinny legs. What kind of a crazed, atavistic response to death is this? Not yet having a handle on the situation, Gordon thinks his mother is trying to piss on Mal’s coffin, like some hopelessly forlorn dog marking its territory. But then someone shouts: “Her water’s broke!” and

Gordon understands—it suddenly dawns on him—she’s about to have a baby. Other hands are steadying Cynthia now, helping her toward the limousine that will take her to the hospital. Gordon is able to step away from the throng with his arms hanging oddly limp and useless at his sides (the first sign of cataplexy). In a moment he’ll quietly slump to his knees in his second bout of narcolepsy, but before that happens he’s able to savor the irony of his mother making such a scene, in light of her recent grumbling about his grandmother.

Who’s being dramatic now? he thinks. He wants to laugh. Hysterically.

Then Gordon adds his own not insignificant role to the spectacle by collapsing like a gutshot Civil War soldier—dreaming even before his head hits the ground—with one foot dangling in his father’s grave.



So that was my debut. I wanted to make my appearance at Mal’s funeral for the sake of symmetry. You know... rub everyone’s noses in the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It’s too bad my head was too big to fit through Cynthia’s cervix, otherwise I would’ve had her splork me out right there on the lawn next to Mal’s grave, which to my way of thinking would’ve been really spectacular—especially with Gordon passed out right next to me. Instead, I was hustled away inside Cynthia’s contracting belly. I felt like a fat man spending a really humid day in an economy car with the air bags deploying every few seconds. Being born is always a hassle.

(Later, in the hospital, when Cynthia found out she’d be having a Caesarian, she insisted that a plastic surgeon sit in on the operation and give her a tummy tuck after they fished me out of her. Her thinking was: Now that I’m without a husband, it’s time to make myself beautiful again. Ecclesiastes had it right about that vanity business.)

Timing is everything when it comes to being born—and not just for reasons any astrologer might give you, although those guys are definitely onto something. I could explain it all with chaos theory, but then I’d have to give you a big-ass lecture about Edward Lorenz, Benoit Mandelbrot, Hopf bifurcations, strange attractors, and nonlinear iterative equations. For now, I’ll just let it go by saying that each birth is an example of sensitive dependence on initial conditions and is subject to its own “butterfly effect.” You’ve probably heard about that one. It’s the theory that a butterfly flapping

its wings over Beijing can cause a ripple in the wind that ends up as a hurricane ripping the shit out of trailer parks along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. When it comes to chaotic systems—like the weather or a human life—tiny variations at the beginning can have huge consequences over time.

Chaos theory works as an explanation for just about everything, if you really want to know. The entire universe was created from a void—or Chaos—whether you believe in Genesis or the Big Bang. Matter came into existence then, and with it, the force of attraction (Eros, or Love, if you have a mythic or spiritual view of things; Gravity for those of you inclined toward the scientific or mundane). So there's another cosmic trinity for your consideration: the whole universe boils down to Chaos, Matter, and Attraction—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And like fractals and holograms, the entire cosmos can be recreated from even the tiniest little part of it. It's like William Blake seeing the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower. Or as Friedrich W.J. Schelling put it, less succinctly, perhaps (but, hey, this was forty years before Darwin): "The universe is made on the model of the human soul... the analogy of each part of the universe to the whole is such that the same idea is reflected constantly from whole to part and part to whole."

Does that make sense, or have I lost you?

Okay, let me try to come at this from a different angle. There are two kinds of chaos in God's universe. There's entropic chaos, where everything spins off into sheer randomness and dissipation ("Things fall apart; the center cannot hold..."), and then there's deterministic chaos, which always contains the latent seeds of self-organization. Deterministic chaos eventually settles into—or is attracted into—complex patterns that are recognizable, but never retrace the same path. These patterns are self-similar and scale-invariant, meaning that they repeat themselves at different scales of observation ("...from whole to part and part to whole."). They're called strange attractors. Benoit Mandelbrot over at Bell Labs was figuring this out right around the time I was being born. He would eventually conclude that all strange attractors are fractal, which is the term he coined to denote configurations that transcend traditional numerical categories. Fractal geometry is the geometry of nature. It can mathematically describe a snowflake, a tree, or a cloud stealing past the Moon in the night.

Stay with me here.... Physicists working on chaos theory some years later hit on the discovery that when chaotic dynamics generate more than one

strange attractor, the attractors can merge, resulting in greater capacities of self-organization, or “symmetry building.” In other words, a little chaos can be good for you. It can dissolve crusty old structures and evolve into bright, shiny new ones, better adapted to survival. But it’s not always easy getting there. First the original attractor is disrupted and the whole system experiences a loss of structure—a period of “transient chaos”—before the new attractor is generated. Think mid-life crisis or a forest on fire. Then there’s the chance that the transient chaos will tip over into entropic chaos, resulting in, well... death. End of story. But even entropic chaos leads to increased self-organization when you take the Other Side into consideration. You don’t think life and death and reincarnation are all utterly devoid of meaning, do you? We’re supposed to be learning things, evolving, striving toward enlightenment so we can become good pals with God, or whatever. And we can’t do that without learning to love chaos. To quote Nietzsche:

“Yea verily, I say unto you: A man must have chaos yet within him to birth a dancing star.”

In our own lives, each major transition to a new strange attractor is accompanied by changes in the quantum field (and believe me, you don’t wanna get me started on quantum field theory...). Those periods of transient chaos can stretch and fold reality so that events usually perceived as being separated in time and place become linked in a non-linear way, which—I know this sounds wacky—sometimes results in our psychic reality being mirrored by external reality through synchronicity and prophetic dreams.

If you’re looking for an example, try Gordon. Remember him, flopped down in the dirt next to his dad’s grave? There’s more than enough crap going on in Gordon’s life to knock him out of his stale old patterns: the death of a parent, his new adventures in narcolepsy, revelations about the sex life of his grandma, a little brother (yours truly) about to join the family. But with Gordon, frankly, it doesn’t take anywhere near that much to mess with his strange attractors. That asthma juice he’s always sucking on elevates his brain’s levels of noradrenaline, which increases his sensitivity to sensory input. In fact, he’s so damn sensitive that half the time he’s living right on the edge of chaos (the “homoclinic point” as chaos theorists call it—where stable dynamics become chaotic and chaotic dynamics become orderly). All it takes, potentially, is a new taste sensation or a foxy glance from a redheaded lady to trigger a massive state change—a Hopf bifurcation—in Gordon’s psyche, sending him careening off on his own butterfly effect (think about what

madeleine crumbs did for Proust, or what Salome did for John the Baptist). Much as he dislikes it, chaos will be a near-constant companion throughout Gordon's life. And when that chaos starts to settle down into new strange attractors, the first place the seeds of self-organization will usually show up are in his dreams—the dream he had at his father's funeral being a perfect case in point.

Here's what happened: Gordon dreamed he was playing tennis on an old clay court surrounded by a forest of pine and maples. His opponent happened to be invisible but cast a dark shadow and returned his serves and volleys perfectly. Soon the balls in play started multiplying—three, then five, then seven and nine—and Gordon broke into a sweat running after them. He stopped long enough to take off his black T-shirt and hang it on a chain-link fence. Just then a lemon-yellow biplane roared overhead and crashed into the woods on a slope below the court. Gordon grabbed his shirt and ran into the forest to see if there were any survivors. As he was jogging along a wide dirt path, a sky blue Bentley Corniche convertible appeared behind him. At the wheel was a serpentman with glistening green-black skin who intended Gordon harm. As the Bentley picked up speed to pass him, the serpentman threw a poisoned dart at Gordon's eyes. Gordon stretched his T-shirt tight between his hands and caught the dart with it, but its tip poked through the cloth and grazed his chest. It didn't deliver enough poison to harm him—in fact, Gordon thought it might even work as an inoculation. The Bentley tried to turn around and come after him again, but one of its wheels got stuck in a ditch and Gordon was able to run right past it. As the path narrowed, a man wearing a fancy white linen shirt stepped out from behind a tree ahead of him. It was his father, looking happier than Gordon had ever seen him. Gold Grecian chains dangled from around Mal's neck and his hair was full and modishly styled. He looked like a jet-setting playboy, the epitome of mid-sixties cool—or at least as cool as Mal ever could be. He was carrying a bundle that turned out to be a baby. He handed it to Gordon, saying telepathically, "Here, have a look at your new little brother." The first telepathic thought that Gordon communicated back was "What a cute baby!" even though it wasn't. The entire right side of the baby's face was covered with reddish-brown fur. Two gnarled horns protruded from the top of its reddened forehead. The poor little baby looked demonic, although Gordon sensed no evil in it. Then it started to cry. Gordon took his little dreambrother in his arms and the crying stopped immediately. They both felt comforted. And that's where the dream ended.

Now here's the kicker: Gordon's dream had me nailed. I really was born with reddish-brown fur covering half of my face (no horns, though). Synchronicity, a lucky guess, or did Gordon remember a glimpse of our future? You tell me. Cynthia thought she'd given birth to a baby werewolf. She was so fucking freaked that I pretty much scared her straight. She blamed the fur on all those pills she'd been popping. She worried that they'd messed with my DNA—and hers, too, for that matter. So she went cold turkey on the painkillers and ditched her role as a suburban junky housewife to become an ardent nudist (but that's a story for later...).

It took a few months, but eventually all the fur rubbed off me. I ended up looking fairly normal. I heard stories, though—and even saw a few pictures—so I grew up with a special fondness for that Warren Zevon song, “Werewolves of London,” which was a big radio hit right around the time I was being conceived. Gordon taught me the lyrics when I was three. He and I would sing it together (“I saw a werewolf drinking a piña colada at Trader Vics—and his hair was perfect...”) whenever we wanted to drive Cynthia crazy.

Gordon was right about me: I'm not demonic (or even daimonic). But I sure as hell brought along enough chaos with me to birth one of Nietzsche's dancing stars. I've turned up at this point to remind Gordon that chaos leads to creativity. If he wants to be an artist—or a Scribe, or even just a whole and healthy human being—he really needs to start embracing chaos. He has to stop running from it and learn how to stay within the seeming madness, so he can confront and then slay the Dragons of Disorder (which so often turn out to be only the Chihuahuas of Petulance). Chaos can be both creator and destroyer, like the goddess Kali. Chaos can be Satan, the Prince of Darkness, or Lucifer, the Light-Bringer. Chaos may be at the root of all evil, but without it there could be no flowering of good. Chaos can be your worst enemy and sometimes chaos can be your best friend. I mean that both as a metaphor and in its literal sense:

Chaos can be your best friend.

ROAD OF EXCESS

It's a sensation like swimming, the return to consciousness from narcolepsy's dream-paralysis, a merman's churning through dense but limpid imagery: a red-furred baby, a hateful lizardman hurling darts from a Bentley, a game of tennis with someone else's shadow. And his father! Gordon is sure he really saw his father, not some fading memory of him, but something more like a spirit visitation, a friendly haunting—as if Mal's soul had passed from catastrophe to deliverance and Gordon was encountering his cheerful, loving ghost. He feels oddly euphoric as he sits up blinking, light-dazzled in the bright sunshine pouring down on the grass-flecked sleeves of his black polyester suit, on his still damp, amniotic-fluid-stained shoes, on the mound of dirt crowned with mats of green turf that will soon be covering his father's coffin. He's euphoric because he knows that somewhere, somehow, Mal still lives.

“Gordon, you lame-ass, I can't believe you fainted when your mom peed on you.”

Jimmy? Gordon peers over his shoulder and sees Jimmy Marrsden standing with his mother right beside him. “For your information, Mr. Wizard,” Janice says to her son, her face impassive behind oversized Gucci sunglasses, “she didn't *pee* on him. Her water broke, okay?” She moves a step closer to Gordon and musses his hair. “Are you all right? We saw you fall.”

“I didn't know you guys were here. I didn't see you.”

“We were spying on you,” Jimmy says.

“We got here late,” Janice amends, looking in her purse for her cigarettes. “Just in time to see them haul off your mother. She asked us to look after you for the next couple of weeks.”

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"It's perfect timing!" Jimmy says with his old boyish enthusiasm, dropping the mask of teenage cool. "We're going camping! Up at Dinkey Creek!"

Gordon thinks, *I just buried my dad, my psycho mom's having a baby, and all you care about is roasting marshmallows.* But what he says is: "Wow! That sounds great!"

So they say goodbye to a few people—Johnny, Uncle Gerald, Wayne and Arnie, Grandma Helen—then they get into Janice's blue Mustang and drive to Gordon's house, where he runs inside to change into summer clothes and to pack an old suitcase as fast as he can.

The house seems weirdly malignant without his mother or father's presence. All the curtains are drawn to block out the sun and a silence has settled over the Danish Modern furniture like a suffocating dust. Hair prickles on the back of Gordon's neck in the still, empty gloom. He darts into his bedroom and unlocks the bottom drawer of his desk, where he keeps a roll of cash hidden behind his manuscript. Most of the bills are fives and tens. A few twenties are rolled tight toward the center. It's about a hundred and eighty dollars in all. Pocketing it, he wonders if that will be enough for the trip. What if he decides to make a new life for himself up there in the mountains?

What if he never comes back?

As he crosses the den to the front door with his hastily packed suitcase, he glances at the boarded-up hole in the living room (walls coated with primer, floor stripped to the cement slab foundation—all bloodstains gone). With tingling ears, Gordon senses an invisible presence—something like a swooping, spectral mummy—rushing toward his back from the darkened bedroom hallway. He's out of the house in a split-second and he can't get the door locked behind him fast enough. Slamming it, he jogs over to Janice's car and climbs in, glad to be in the company of the living again.

They drive back through town to the **Western Auto** store across the train tracks at the far end of Draper Street. Jimmy has informed Gordon that he'll need to buy some fishing gear and a sleeping bag. "And what about a fishing license? Do you have one?" Gordon doesn't. He'll need that, too. He wonders if there will be a test. He tries to remember how many whiskers there are on a catfish; how a male trout differs from a female trout (*is it just coloration, or is there such a thing*

as a trout penis?). Also: is it illegal to fish near a beaver dam; and if not, is it legal to fish for beavers? Gordon envisions a thrashing brown pelt, yellow buckteeth, a wooden bass lure being chewed to pieces. His imagination is getting away from him again.

The image of protruding yellow teeth reminds Gordon of Mike Shriver. Was that what came rushing down the hallway after him—Mike's furious lost soul? *Go toward the Light, you moron....*

As they park in front of the store, Gordon is reminded that his parents considered **Western Auto** a rival of **Swannson Lumber** because they both sold tools and gardening supplies. He had been told not to shop there. But when he was old enough to ride his bike unsupervised and go into stores on his own, Gordon discovered **Western Auto** to be the far superior retail outlet, because they also carried toys, sporting goods, and custom bike accessories—things he was keenly interested in. So he occasionally shopped at **Western Auto** on the sly, and once, when he'd been feeling slighted as an employee of **Swannson Lumber**, he'd even applied for a job there.

He remembers how it happened: He was around ten at the time. His Uncle Gerald had caught him painting a mural on the side of one of the big plywood dumpsters out in back, using several half-empty spray cans of Rustoleum that someone had mysteriously thrown away (Metallic Copper seemed to be quite popular). Gordon had spent a dull morning inside the hardware store stocking shelves and he considered himself on his lunch break. His uncle considered otherwise. When he saw what Gordon was doing, he started shouting: "Are you on the payroll? *Are you?* Because I sure don't pay you to do that! Get back to work!"

At least, Gordon thought, his uncle might have shown some appreciation for his artistic labors. He was trying to make the lumberyard a more culturally enlivened place. The mural depicted a group of six Picasso-like sea-monsters staring at a naked French woman's bulbous behind. People could tell the woman was French because she wore pearls and smoked a Gauloise from a long black cigarette holder.

Gordon has long since forgotten whatever profound metaphysical concepts he'd once hoped the Horny Sea-Monsters With Naked French Lady mural would express, but he remembers quite well how

his capitalist uncle's reaction to it had made him miffed. He got on his bike and rode straight over to the **Western Auto** store, where shyness overtook his indignation shortly after he walked in through the aluminum framed doorway. A wide woman with a toad's glum face sat at the cash register. Actually, she looked like a toad that had just been told she had to pay down a mountain of debts run up by her shiftless toad husband. Gordon didn't know if she owned the store or only worked there. Timidly, he walked over to her. Summoning all of his courage, he said in a voice barely above a whisper: "I have a friend who's looking for a job. He has a lot of experience in this line of work. Do you have any openings?" Gordon didn't know how he would go about explaining that the friend was actually himself if a job offer was to be tendered, but the toad woman simply said to him: "No. We don't have any openings now—or ever." So that was that. Rebuffed, but still seeking a Marxist sort of vengeance, Gordon went back to the lumberyard and tried to organize Johnny Hoss and his crew to strike with him for higher wages.

That didn't work out too well, either.

Three years later, the toad woman still sits behind the cash register. Gordon waves to her as he and Jimmy head for the aisle with all the fishing poles. Selecting the proper pole is the first order of business. Gordon is initially attracted to the mellow amber glow of a tall bamboo surfcasting rod with iridescent green thread wrapped at the guides and ferrules—but when he sees the \$139.99 price tag he's dissuaded. Jimmy tells him it's the wrong pole for trout fishing, anyway. They pick up a few of the others and swing them above their heads in the narrow aisle, testing to see if the rod's "action" is fast or slow. Gordon can't tell the difference, but apparently Jimmy can. Finally, they settle on a nifty maroon telescopic rod that slides into itself like the shafts of a folding umbrella. When whipped overhead with a snap of the wrist, the rod impressively extends from a length of about fourteen inches to a full seven feet or so. It's like a gadget that M might have designed for James Bond in his spare time. Plus, it's relatively cheap.

Next they select a reel. Spin-casting reels, with wedge-shaped plastic thumb-release triggers at the back of enclosed spools, are for kids, Jimmy claims. He tells Gordon to go with a spinning reel, which has an open spool with a metal half-hoop called a bail arcing across

one side of it. Learning to cast with a spinning reel will be a little trickier than just hitting the trigger on a spin-caster, but in the long run, Jimmy assures him, spinning reels are less trouble to maintain. They also look cooler—and Gordon has always been a sucker for cool aesthetics. He selects a professional-looking platinum-and-black model made by Shimano. At forty-eight dollars, it's the most expensive thing he'll be buying that day and for a long time to come. He hopes those fish are worth it.

Fishing tackle is on the next aisle over. Gordon is fascinated by the wide variety of lures: the Ubangi-like lips jutting in front of the cartoonish fish eyes painted on the crankbait; the exotic spotted and colored plumage of the dry flies; the shiny metal blades riding opposite the barbed hooks covered in Dr. Seuss hairdos on the V-rigged spinners. He wants to buy one of everything, but Jimmy tells him Dinkey Creek is stocked with trout raised in a hatchery, where they were fed food pellets every day. They'll strike best at something similar. He hands him a squat little jar of Balls-O'-Fire salmon eggs. Seen through the glass, the eggs are stacked as tight as a beehive's honeycomb, almost glowing with a florescent reddish-pink. They also come in natural orange and a cheddar cheese flavor. Gordon decides to get all three. Then Jimmy helps him pick out some Golden Eagle fishing hooks, a spool of Stren 6-pound-test monofilament line, and a plastic box full of assorted split-shot lead sinkers. Despite Jimmy's advice, Gordon decides he also needs at least one of the lures: a sort of modified spoon displaying red and white stripes on top and chrome on the bottom, trailing a wicked little silver treble hook. It's called a Number Two Dang Samuel Gill-Buster. Gordon buys it for its name as much as anything else.

On the way to the front counter they pick up an army green canvas creel (sort of an over-the-shoulder purse for carrying fish) and a navy blue nylon sleeping bag. When they set everything down in front of the toad woman the total comes to just over one hundred dollars, a shocking amount for Gordon. But as he's getting his wallet out, Janice steps in front of him and sets down a credit card, saying, "Don't worry. Your mother told me she'd pay me back for everything." Gordon has a hard time believing Cynthia would ever say anything like that. She must have been in shock or something.

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“Hey, I almost forgot,” Jimmy says. “We still need a fishing license.”

The toad woman nods her head. She gives Gordon a little card to fill out with his name and address. There’s no test—just a twelve-dollar fee, which Gordon pays, with money from his already open wallet.

“Hope you catch something,” the toad woman says on their way out. Coming from her, it sounds ominous.



There’s a delirious sense of freedom, riding with Jimmy in the back of his father’s Ford F-150 under the camper shell, huddled between sleeping bags, rolled up tents, and Igloo coolers on their way up to Dinkey Creek. Gordon has never ridden in the back of a pick-up before, and he thinks it’s great. He can watch the scenery pass in a novel way, everything receding in the camper shell’s rear window. There goes the old brick mansion fronted by two-story Doric columns on 18th Street, once the home of Samuel Draper and now a showplace for the pianos and electric organs of **Erickson Music**. There’s Kimmie Swenson’s place, on the corner where 18th turns into Academy Road. Kimmie’s a year younger than Gordon and Jimmy, but she already stands about 6’-3”. She looks like a freak—you’d practically need a ladder to climb up and kiss her (Gordon, waiting for a growth spurt, is only 5’-4” and Jimmy isn’t much bigger). Now the houses start to drop away, replaced by drainage ditches and vineyards and wide-open fields of strawberries where the dirt is packed down into the herringbone patterns left by tractor tires. A peeling billboard in the shape of a gigantic blue Dala horse with yellow flower reins announces: **“Velkommen to Kingsburg! The Swedish Village”** but they’re actually leaving it, going the other way.

Meanwhile, Jimmy is busy taking inventory, opening coolers and rooting through brown paper grocery bags. “Okay... we’ve got Froot Loops, Cocoa Puffs, six cans of Shasta Root Beer, eleven Diet Cokes, two jumbo packs of beef jerky, a spray-thingy of Cheez-Wiz, some old Ritz crackers, baked beans, barbecued potato chips, and some licorice whips. Want anything?”

Gordon takes a licorice whip, but he's more interested in what's going on outside the windows. They pass an orchard where fat orange fruit dangles like Christmas tree bulbs among the dark green leaves—*peaches*, he thinks, although they could be apricots, for all he knows. Then more vineyards, growing Thompson Seedless grapes—*that* he knows for certain. In a few more weeks, migrant workers will swarm the vineyards to pick the grapes and lay them out on brown paper sheets so they can dry in the sun and turn into raisins. All that dehydrating grape juice creates a sickly sweet stink. By late August the smell of grape funerals will blanket Kingsburg, a funky, cotton candy musk there's no escaping. Gordon much prefers the pungent tang of manure from the cow pastures, like the one coming up on his left.

The sky is blue-gray above the barbed wire. There isn't another car on the road anywhere. A regiment of flat-bellied cumulus clouds fades to a haze above the foothills in the distance. They drive several more miles, passing old barns and a defunct grocery store (where a rain-stained butcher paper sign still reads: **ICE COLD BEER / MUST SHOW I.D.**). Then, suddenly, the pastures give way to junkyards and cyclone-fenced lots full of foxtails, trash, and star thistle as Jimmy's dad pulls the truck into a sun-blasted Texaco station on the edge of Parlier to fill up.

Through the side window of the camper shell, Gordon sees a service bay, its oil-stained concrete floor strewn with spare tires and the guts of some poor AMC Gremlin's transmission. Dusty fan belts and air filters hang from hooks on the pegboard walls. On top of a smudged red toolbox, a mariachi tune trumpets from a portable AM/FM radio with a bent coat hanger for an antenna. Next door, there's an abandoned *taqueria* with cinder-block walls painted prison blue, now a canvas for graffiti. The spray-painted messages ("*Los Vatos Forever*" "*Amores Perros*") strike Gordon as both artistic and depraved. He notices fine black soot-marks near the tops of the broken window frames. Was there a fire, or just a lot of grease smoke from frying taco meat?

A middle-aged Mexican man with a Fu Manchu mustache and an enormous beer gut startles Gordon with a shout of "*Hola!*" He walks over to the pick-up wearing a black pearl-buttoned cowboy shirt with red piping at the sleeves. His tooled leather belt is weighted down with a rodeo buckle as big as a baby's face, holding up a pair of grimy jeans.

The man looks dangerous, like someone who might stick you with a switchblade while you're playing pinball, just because you're winning. Maybe *he* set the fire next door. If he tries anything, hopefully Jimmy's dad will put him in jail.

"Some gasoline-o, *amigo*," Stan says to the Mexican man. "Fill'er up, *por favor*." Turning to Janice after the man goes about his business, he says, "Can you believe these prices? Even out here, in the middle of nowhere, they're still stickin' it to us. At least we don't have to wait in line, though."

There's a gasoline shortage this summer—something to do with OPEC and the Carter administration wanting America to economize, as near as Gordon can make out. Unleaded is over a dollar a gallon for the first time he can remember and in most places there are long lines to get to it. There's been talk that gas rationing will be the next step, which has everyone pissed. He just hopes it'll all blow over before he turns sixteen, so he can still buy a gas-guzzling Corvette.

"About how far do you think we are from Kingsburg?" he asks Jimmy.

"Dad, how many miles have we come?" Jimmy asks his father through the little sliding window space between the camper and the truck's cabin.

"About eight," Stan says.

"Okay, thanks." Jimmy slides the window shut. "About eight," he tells Gordon.

"I heard."

Eight miles and it's already as if they're in a different universe. Parlier seems decrepit and strange and somehow menacing—also exciting, and even kind of glorious, exactly *because* it's decrepit and strange and menacing—while at the same time it's just like any number of hick towns that dot the San Joaquin Valley. There's really not much to distinguish it from Selma or Fowler or Dinuba or Reedley—or even Kingsburg, for that matter (minus the Swedish theme). Big, shabby houses toward the center of town, rows of nearly identical ranch homes in the subdivisions further out, and tenant farmer shacks beyond that. A Rexall drugstore on the corner, a Napa Auto Parts store close by, one beat-to-crap movie house (or maybe an old bowling alley or a tacky roller rink), a few used car lots with prices soaped on

the windshields of homely Pontiacs and Buicks, and lots of churches. More churches than restaurants, actually—as if God is more important than eating.

After Stan pays for the gas, they drive out along the town's main street. Gordon thinks about how easy it would be to disappear into a place like Parlier and begin a new life. A life free of his mother's incessant demands and her sarcastic belittling, old habits grown worse—bolstered by self-pity—now that Mal is gone and she'll have to take care of a new baby. (*Has my brother been born yet?* Gordon wonders. *Will his face be all furry, like in my dream?*) Parlier is close enough that he could ride his bike to it, yet far enough away that the Kingsburg police would never think of looking for him there. He could blend in, assume a new name, maybe get a job bending sheetmetal for the local heating and air conditioning company or doing paste-up work for the Parlier newspaper. Maybe a kindly Mexican family would take him in. A big, loud, loving family with lots of aunts and uncles and cousins who all get together every Saturday night in a big cherry orchard strung with yellow Christmas tree lights to sing and dance and tell jokes and drink beer while everyone eats homemade tamales and *chiles relenos*.

For a kid who's grown up in the Swannson family's circumstances, that vision seems a kind of paradise. When Gordon first read John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, he wanted to run away to Monterey and join the *paisanos*. They seemed to understand the deeper rhythms of life, with their jugs of red wine and their gladness to know each other and to be doing almost nothing. But maybe there are *paisanos* in Parlier. And maybe he could fall in love with one of their sisters, an untamable, whip-smart girl with soulful brown eyes, a fierce laugh, and beautiful black straight hair. After he married her, the *paisanos* would embrace him as their brother-in-law. The cheap red wine and refried beans would never stop flowing....

"Do you think you could ever fall in love with a Mexican girl?" Gordon asks Jimmy.

"Nah..." Jimmy scoffs. "Some of those beaner chicks have great tits and asses when they're around fifteen, but it all turns to fat once they start fucking. Then they just wanna get knocked up so they can lie around the house all day collecting welfare. All they do is watch TV and eat government cheese, so by the time they're twenty, they've

turned into one of those big ol' gross *mamacitas*. You know the ones—always cruising around the malls like a tugboat, whacking their poor kids on the side of the head just because they want some candy, or an Orange Julius. So if you're asking me, I'd say stick with white chicks. Or Japs—they stay skinny and they're good at math."

All of this is offered in a tone of practical advice. Gordon had no idea Jimmy was such a racist. They've both grown up in a town full of Mexicans (*or Mexican-Americans, or Chicanos or whatever...*) and for Gordon there is some vague distinction in his mind between white people and brown people, but it seems no more important to him than being a Democrat or a Republican. In a way, he thinks less of the Republicans, because they were responsible for Nixon.

"I didn't know you were so prejudiced," Gordon says.

"I'm not prejudiced," Jimmy retorts. "I'm just being statistically accurate. You should talk to my Uncle Lloyd. He sells life insurance. He knows the statistics on everybody."

"So Mexican chicks are statistically more likely to turn into whales and beat their kids?"

"That's what Lloyd told me. He really knows his shit. That's how come he makes so much money. 'Manual labor is for suckers,' he says."

"You make him sound like some kind of hero."

"He's pretty cool for an old fat guy. We drink beer together. Last time he took off his toupee and made the dog wear it. And he's got this watch that's like a cuckoo clock, only instead of a bird, a naked lady comes out and gives this guy a blowjob every hour. He cracks me up. You should meet him."

From the way it sounds to Gordon, Uncle Lloyd is the antithesis of Johnny Hoss, a flabby bigot who's probably a con artist. But Jimmy seems to admire him in the same way that Gordon admires Johnny. *Weird.*

Both boys look up as Janice knocks on the closed window between the truck cab and the camper. She slides it open, saying, "Hey, I almost forgot, I picked up some Wacky Packages for you guys." She opens her purse and hands them several brightly colored packages of bubblegum with demented stickers inside. They're like baseball cards,

only they spoof advertising in a Mad Magazine kind of way. Gordon and Jimmy have been collecting them for years.

“Cool!” says Jimmy, while Gordon adds: “Hey thanks, Mrs. Marrsden.”

“Make sure you divide them up even-Steven.” The window slides shut like the food slot behind the tiger’s den at Roeding Park Zoo.

Jimmy divvies up the packages, then he and Gordon start tearing at the waxy paper flaps. They ignore the brittle sticks of bubble gum (one quick burst of flavor and then they turn into hard little wads that make your jaws ache, chewing them). They get right to the stickers, instead. The first one that Gordon uncovers is a parody of Hostess Twinkies called *Hostile Thinkies*. The familiar cellophane packaging is filled with cartoon brains instead of spongy yellow cakes. Two angry exploded heads, one blue and one green, bookend the slogan, “*Blow Your Mind with Brain Filled Hostile Thinkies*.” It’s funny and gross all at once. Gordon wonders if companies like Hostess pay any attention to Wacky Packages. He wonders if Topps Chewing Gum, Inc.—the maker of Wacky Packages—has ever faced a lawsuit.

The sticker underneath (there are two in every pack) shows crispy human hands climbing out of a red and white striped bucket of *Kentucky Fried Fingers*. “*Better Than Biting Your Nails*,” the slogan goes. “*It’s Chicken lickin’ good*.”

“Do you want this one?” Gordon tosses the *Kentucky Fried Fingers* sticker to Jimmy. “I have two already.”

Tearing into his third package, Jimmy says, “I’ve already got that one and all these already, too. But thanks, anyway.”

It’s amazing to think of all the stuff they’ve collected in their short lives: fossils, coins, sea shells, bottle caps, postcards from exotic lands, surf-smoothed bits of colored beach glass. So many things have seemed rare and precious, worth keeping forever. But it’s starting to dawn on Gordon that the world supplies nearly everything in abundance. And in a society dominated by late-stage corporate capitalism, everything is considered expendable, including himself.

He asks Jimmy, “How many of these stickers do you think they print each year? Five hundred thousand? A million?”

“A butt-load, that’s for sure. Maybe Lloyd could find out for us.”

"If it's over a million, why do we bother collecting these things?"

"Hell if I know. Because it's fun?"

"Maybe we're just being ripped-off. The whole point of advertising is to make people buy junk they don't really need. We like these stickers because they make fun of ads. It makes us feel cool, like we're in on the big joke. But really, we're still wasting our money on junk, like everybody else." Gordon opens his last Wacky Package. There's nothing he hasn't seen before in that one, either.

"So who gives a crap?" Jimmy says. "I mean, it would be better if the gum didn't suck so bad, but still, so what?" He puts a few sticks of the horrid gum in his mouth and makes a face like he's chewing glass.

"We could be spending that money on beer."

"Oh. Good point."

They've been scheming to load up on beer and get drunk together for the past couple of weeks, but so far they haven't been able to find anyone over 21 to buy for them. Johnny Hoss turned Gordon down in a good-natured way, telling him he should only drink while being supervised by an adult. Jimmy's Uncle Lloyd sounds like a good bet, but there must be some reason why Jimmy hasn't asked him yet. They've talked about paying a few extra dollars to Smitty the Bum—who sleeps in the oleander bushes down by the railroad tracks—but Smitty hasn't been around for a while. Maybe he hitched a ride to the coast for the summer.

"Which do you like better," Jimmy asks, "Budweiser or Coors?"

"I've only drunk Coors with Johnny, but I'm thinking maybe we should switch to something else." Gordon explains that Colorado's biggest polluter is the Adolph J. Coors Brewing Company, which is run by Joseph Coors—an arrogant, extremely wealthy, opportunistic asshole who thinks of the world as his personal ashtray. Three years ago, Joseph Coors provided the start-up capital for The Heritage Foundation—a right-wing think tank that wants to give tax breaks to the rich and screw over women, children, minorities, labor unions, and the environment. They plan to accomplish those goals by teaming up with the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority movement and getting Ronald Reagan elected President.

"Since when did you turn into such a stuck-up little hippie-girl?"

“What do you mean?” Gordon is wondering if the Hoo-Hoo Club has any dealings with The Heritage Foundation. They certainly seem to share a lot of the same political imperatives.

“First you talk about marrying some hot little beaner princess from Parlier or somewhere, and now you’re saying we should boycott Coors so this old fart actor doesn’t get elected President. That’s so pussyfied! You’re acting like César Chávez with a stick up his butt.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to *marry* her.”

“Yeah, well, whatever....”

“You want the guy from *Bedtime for Bonzo* to be your President?”

“Oh, like a peanut farmer is a lot better?”

“He’s a lot smarter, at least.”

“Like that means anything. Smart people are always the most screwed-up. Just look in the mirror. And you can’t even vote. So why are you all worried about politics all of a sudden?”

“So you don’t even care who killed JFK?” Gordon asks, baiting him. A few days earlier, the House Sub-Committee on Assassinations had announced to the press that sound evidence recorded by a Dallas motorcycle patrolman’s microphone proved there was a fourth shot in Dealey Plaza on November 22nd, 1963—and it had come from the infamous grassy knoll.

“That’s different,” says Jimmy. “That’s a conspiracy—which is a great thing to think about. Like UFOs, Bigfoot, and whether dogs can predict earthquakes.”

“I think the Mafia did it and the CIA covered it up. Jack Ruby was the key to the whole thing, but first they drugged him to make him sound crazy and then they killed him so he wouldn’t talk.”

“Just like he killed Oswald.”

“Right. The whole thing stinks. And then we got LBJ, who knew, and Nixon, the biggest liar ever.”

“Look, man, like I said—forget politics. What about the Loch Ness Monster?”

Gordon hasn’t really given much thought to the Loch Ness Monster. “Maybe it’s *tulpa*,” he says.

“What the hell’s a *tulpa*?” Jimmy asks, his voice preemptively full of scorn.

"It's a Tibetan word for a thought-form creation—sort of like how kids make up imaginary friends. Basically, the idea about *tulpas* is that if you put enough thought-energy into visualizing something like the Loch Ness Monster, at a certain point other people will start being able to see it, too."

"You're just making that up," Jimmy says.

"No, really..." Gordon protests. "I read about it in this book called *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. It was written by this explorer lady named Alexandra David-Néel, who was, like, the first white woman to ever climb the Himalayas and sneak into the forbidden city of Lhasa, back around 1924. She even met the thirteenth Dalai Lama—twice."

"*Tulpa-loompas...*" Jimmy half-sings, "what a load of crap."

"Okay, so maybe the Loch Ness Monster isn't a *tulpa*," Gordon backpedals. "Maybe it's just the ghost of a plesiosaur haunting the lake that it swam in 65 million years ago," he says. "Or it could just be a really big sturgeon. Y'know, the fish that makes caviar? They're really creepy-looking, if you haven't seen one. Like a crocodile from Mars or something. And then we eat their eggs."

"Gross."

"I know. It's as bad as those Chinese guys who eat fried scorpions and raw puppy livers." *It's a weird world we live in*, thinks Gordon. *People will eat just about anything—including the body of Christ, if they're Catholic. But why do we care so much about the Loch Ness Monster, the Abominable Snowman, Mothmen, and extraterrestrials, when the world is already full of incredibly bizarre real creatures like the coelacanth, the giraffe, and the duck-billed platypus?*

An answer comes to him unbidden: *Maybe it's because no one's eaten an Abominable Snowman yet.*

Jimmy says, "So you don't think Nessie's a real dinosaur?"

"Probably not. I guess I don't really know. I'd have to do some research."

"But you believe in ghosts."

"Sure. They've been reported everywhere, all over the world, for thousands of years. So at the very least, they're part of the collective unconscious. But I think our astral bodies survive after we die—only some of them get lost on their way through the *Bardo*. Instead of

following the Light to heaven, they keep returning to places they were familiar with in the material world. Those are the ghosts.”

“Gordon, you spew more crazy fucking bullshit than anyone I know.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“So?”

“So what’s an astral body, doofus?”

“It’s sort of like your soul, only not all of it, because part of your soul always stays in heaven watching over you while you’re incarnated on Earth—like a guardian angel. When you die, you see a light that guides you back to that other part of your soul, or spirit. If you’ve learned everything you were supposed to learn from the time you spent on Earth, then those two parts of your soul are joined into one and you get to live in heaven. If you haven’t learned all your lessons and you still have some karma to work out, then your astral body has to go through the *Bardo*, which is kind of this dream world with different levels where a whole bunch of weird things happen. On the lower levels there’re these big hairy *Bardo* demons with a million fangs and belts made out of human skulls. On some other levels you get to have really great sex. Eventually your astral body finds the level it’s supposed to be on, and then it sort of evaporates and gets reincarnated again.”

“Who told you this crap?”

“It’s common knowledge. Most of it comes from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which has been around forever. You haven’t read it?”

“I don’t waste my time reading junk like that,” Jimmy says with outright contempt.

“Oh, like those *Flash Gordon* and *Green Hornet* comic books you collect are so deep. They teach you everything you need to know about life and death, right?”

“Eat shit, Gordon.”

“No, you eat shit, Jimmy-Toad.”

They sit in silence for a spell, encased in separate cocoons of spiteful pride, although they both know they can’t stay mad at each other for long because they have a whole trip to get through together.

Besides, on some level they recognize each other as kindred spirits—yin and yang, two sides of the same coin. Gordon suspects they knew each other in previous lives—but again, that’s not something he’s willing to voice.

Miles pass. At the junction where North Academy Road turns into Highway 168, they look out the rear window and see a roadside stand selling gaudy Mexican garden statues: frogs pushing flower carts, burros wearing sombreros, muscle-bound jungle cats, bejeweled Indian elephants, hooded gnomes, and crouching, fat-bellied Easter Bunnies. Toward the center of this menagerie, towering above everything else, is a four-foot-tall plaster Virgin Mary. A bow-legged baby Jesus with a bloody crown of thorns lies half-buried in gravel at her feet. Gordon suddenly experiences a sensation like *déjà vu*, only stranger—an intimation that something there will be important to him in the future.

Trying to get a new conversation started, Gordon asks, “Do you think Jesus ever talked back to the Virgin Mary when he was a teenager?”

“Well, she was his mom. He would’ve *had* to’ve given her some shit every now and then, if he wasn’t a total wuss. But I don’t remember hearing about it. What’s it say in the Bible?” Jimmy shoots Gordon a hard look. “I know. You’ve probably read *that* from cover-to-cover, too, haven’t you?”

Actually, Gordon has—despite the fact that his parents made fun of him for doing so. Reclining on his bed in the foggy evenings of last winter reading a King James Bible, Gordon looked up on more than one occasion to find Cynthia and Mal peering in at him from the bedroom doorway, smirking. Gordon didn’t understand why they thought it was such a big deal. He wasn’t turning into some kind of a religious fanatic. He just had an interest in the Bible as literature. Frankly, he found most of it on the dull side—especially the Old Testament. He couldn’t keep track of who begat whom; there was an appalling amount of self-righteously justified violence on the part of Jehovah and almost everyone else; and a phrase kept cropping up—“he pisseth against the wall”—that really started to annoy Gordon because it seemed to mean something other than what he thought it meant, but he couldn’t figure out what.

"The Bible hardly says anything at all about Jesus as a teenager," Gordon says. "It's kind of weird, don't you think? Like he didn't exist for all that time."

"Someone should write a book about it. They could call it: *CHRIST! The Lost Teen Years*. It could be all about how Jesus learned kung fu and ended up scoring chicks like Mary Magdalene."

"Maybe you should write it." Gordon is having a hard enough time with *Blind and Hairless*, now approaching 200 manuscript pages. He can't imagine Jimmy having the patience to write a novel of his own someday.

"Maybe I will," Jimmy says. "You don't think I can, but I might surprise you."

"That'd be cool. Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority would probably have you crucified, if you do."

Twenty or thirty miles later, the air starts to get thinner as Mr. Marrsden drives them through switchbacks high up in the mountains. All that jostling around in the back of the pick-up is making them both feel dizzy and sick. Jimmy suggests they eat some Pepto-Bismol tablets that he saw in one of the grocery bags. The chalky, too-sweet taste of the little pink tablets makes Gordon feel worse, but he chews up four of them, anyway. Jimmy eats eight. "I think I'm gonna barf," he complains.

"That's Jesus getting back at you for making fun of him," says Gordon, although he feels on the verge of puking as well.

"That guy needs to get a sense of humor," says Jimmy after he clutches his stomach and lets out a sick-smelling burp.

"If your dad made you die for the sins of the world, you'd probably end up a little moody, too."

Outside the rear window, they can see a swaying panorama of Ponderosa Pines and Incense Cedars—almost enough to make a forest—but neither of them feels well enough to appreciate the change in scenery. Instead, their gazing turns inward. Jimmy asks, "Did you ever read *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke?"

"Yeah. In third grade. That's the one where aliens called the Overlords park their giant spaceships over every major city in the world and stop all the wars—but then they don't show their faces for

fifty years. And when they finally do, they turn out to look just like devils.”

“Horns, batwings, red skin, everything! That was so cool!”

“So what’s your point?”

“The aliens weren’t evil, they were good. They just had advanced technology—and that scared everybody.”

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

“Right. Like I said.”

“Actually, Arthur Clarke said that... and his idea was that the arrival of the Overlords heralded a paradigm shift in the evolution of the human species, when all the children on the planet would be leaving to join the Overmind. Any major change like that scares the crap out of people, so the collective unconscious somehow looked into the future and saw what the Overlords looked like, then turned them into a symbol for evil, thousands of years before they actually showed up.”

“That guy had just totally awesome ideas. Maybe everything we’re afraid of is actually good for us.”

“I don’t know if the Overlords were all that ‘good.’ But Rilke wrote something about that idea. He said, ‘Maybe all the dragons in our lives are really princesses, who are just waiting for us to be beautiful and brave. And maybe everything terrible is deep down something helpless that wants help from us.’ That’s not it exactly, but you get the gist.”

“That’s so *pusyified*!”

“I didn’t say it—Rilke did. And William Blake said a lot of things that were similar. He said God is like an ‘absentee landlord’ and at least Satan is on the side of progress and increased knowledge for mankind, like Prometheus.”

“Prometheus is that guy who stole fire from the gods, right?”

“Right.”

“See? I’m not totally lame.”

“Have you ever heard of Gnosticism?”

“Isn’t that the religion for those guys who smoke all the pot down in Jamaica?”

“No. That’s something else. Gnosticism is... well, it’s kind of hard to explain. It’s an old religion that believes we can get to heaven by acquiring knowledge, through intuition and experience. The Gnostics think this world was created by a bad god—a *Demiurge*—who wandered too far from the True God and somehow got perverted. The Demiurge acts like Jehovah in the Old Testament and believes he’s the only God, but he’s not. He’s still carrying around half the True God’s essence, but he’s forgotten about that part of himself. The Demiurge made this world with his other, less divine half. That’s why things are so screwed up, why the world is full of pain and suffering. The Demiurge rules this world through beings called *Archons*, which are kind of like evil genies that enslave mankind, either by giving people what they want or by fucking them over in the worst ways possible. Archons can be good or bad, like the Overlords in *Childhood’s End*, but mostly they’re bad, because they’ve forgotten they’re part of the True God, too. The True God is also part of us. In us it’s called the Divine Spark. Like Jesus said, ‘The Kingdom of God is within.’ It’s our job, through Gnosis, to liberate our Divine Spark from the trap of the material world and rejoin our Angelic Twin in heaven. But before we can do that, we have to go through a series of freaky dreams and mystical experiences that modify our astral and physical bodies.”

There’s more, of course—the role of Sophia (Wisdom) in creating the world and the Demiurge; the recent English translation of the Nag Hammadi Library (which contains Gnostic papyrus books dating back to the third- and fourth-centuries); Mary Magdalene as Jesus’ earthly consort, or maybe even his wife—but Gordon is feeling far too sick to get into it at the moment and Jimmy, frankly, doesn’t seem all that interested.

A hint of malice glints in Jimmy’s eye as he says, “That’s the biggest load of bullshit I ever heard.”

“Glad you liked it.”

“The only thing I liked was that part about the Archons. If they’re really like genies, could you say some magic words and get them to do stuff for you?”

“Only if you promised to help them mess up the world even more. I’m guessing Joseph Coors probably has Archons hanging around him all the time now.” It’s really starting to bother Gordon that every bottle

of Coors that people drink helps to further Joseph Coors' world-screwing agenda.

Jimmy croons the chorus from John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High" until they lurch through a sudden hairpin turn and he has to open the rear window and stick his head out so he can puke like a dog over the pick-up's tailgate. Shasta Root Beer, stomach acid, half-digested Froot Loops, chunks of bubble gum and licorice, and a distinctive pink spume of Pepto-Bismol all land in the road with a frothy plop. The sour mist of Jimmy's barf gets blown back into Gordon's face. He joins Jimmy at the tailgate, hurling his guts out as they pass through a pine-crowded canyon.

And that's how they arrive at Dinkey Creek.



That night, in the army surplus tent that Gordon and Jimmy pitched under the pine boughs and twinkling stars (several yards away from the bigger blue nylon tent sheltering Jimmy's parents), Gordon dreams he's sitting on the edge of a high cliff. Jimmy sits next to him on his left and a friendly plesiosaur with maternal eyes sits in a shallow cave just behind them. In the canyon below, the land is marshy, dotted with small ponds. Gordon points out one pond in particular to Jimmy, where a large rattlesnake is emerging from the water. As the snake slithers onto dry land, it transforms into a dinosaur with muscular hind legs. The dinosaur walks on all fours for a while, then starts walking upright as it transforms once again. It becomes a giant reptileman with a cowed and bulbous head like a malevolent octopus. It reminds Gordon of the big-headed, cloven-brained aliens in spangled bathrobes depicted in science fiction movies from the fifties. Gordon has a camera with him (a Mamiya RZ67) and he takes the reptileman's picture with it. The giant reptileman walks over to stand inside a dark cavern in the far cliff wall, where he's joined by others just like him. Three of them leave the cavern and walk in formation past the far side of the pond where the snake first emerged. Gordon gets more pictures. He's not sure his F-stop is set correctly and he's anxious to develop the film, to make sure he has the image. He's about to go off in search of a

film lab when he looks down and sees Jimmy running up to the reptilemen, waving a small red book.

He wants their autographs.



I guess it's only natural that Gordon would be thinking about religion after the death of our biological father. I mean, I never really knew the guy (at least not in this incarnation), so growing up without him doesn't seem like that big a deal to me. But for Gordon the concept of not having a dad must be kind of freaky, because he was so used to having Mal around. So what do you do when you're experiencing a sense of loss and feeling like you're living in an absurd, malicious universe? You turn to religion for the answers.

Basically, what Gordon wants to know is: "Why does evil shit happen?"

Almost all anger boils down to us being pissed off at God for not running the show better. Yeah I know, "God is great, God is good," "The Lord works in mysterious ways," and blah, blah, fucking blah... but look—if the God of this world is all-powerful and all-good, then how do you account for all the heinous crap that's been going on throughout history? Original Sin? I don't think so. I mean, animals have been eating other animals since way before man showed up. Do you think a merciful God would deliberately create a planet that's one big predatory snack bar? Being eaten hurts. I should know. Around 1838, I fell out of a whaling schooner off the coast of Nantucket (crow's nest, sudden gale) and a shark came along and ate me raw. It hurt like hell, believe me—especially that first bite taken out of my ass while I was still dogpaddling.

And that's just dumb animal suffering, which is bad enough, but what about the ravages of premeditated evil? I'm talking about war atrocities, mob lynchings, burning witches at the stake. I'm talking about poisoning a town's drinking water for the sake of corporate profits, causing children to grow up with brain tumors and liver disease. I'm talking about rape and murder and arson—acts that are consciously intended to cause suffering to other innocent human beings. Why would an almighty, loving God put up with any of that? I mean, really... what the hell is up?

I'll tell you what's up: the Gnostics have it right—or as nearly right as anyone. This world was created by a bad god. A Demiurge. Only a flawed

creator would create a flawed world. Original Sin exists, but not as most people understand it. The Original Sin was the creation of this world by a half-assed god who'd wandered too far from the True God's influence. Pumped up on the sins of pride and hubris, like Lucifer (way too much like Lucifer, actually), this half-assed god created a world that was a mixture of good and evil. A world in which every creature born to it is bound to suffer.

Suffering is the existential manifestation of evil in the world. And suffering exists. We know that. But what we sometimes forget is that the world is also full of good. Which is kind of amazing when you think about it. If we're all just a collection of soulless atoms—random bundles of self-serving biology—then we should always be running around trying to fulfil our own greedy desires while we screw over everyone else in the process. But that isn't always what happens, is it? How do you explain giving to charity, or extreme acts of self-sacrifice? Some people have given up their lives for the sake of others. It's a mixed-up, fucked-up, crazy-making world, but at least there's love in it, and a certain amount of the True God's benevolent influence.

But then why did the True God let this half-assed god, the Demiurge, get away with making such a flawed universe in the first place? I think Gordon himself provides part of the answer (with a little coaching from his daimon) in a book he's going to write in his early twenties called The Sensuous Hermit. Since that book is already written from the perspective of eternity, and I'm still able to skip around in the past and future, I'll just quote from the relevant passage here:

*"There's a Yiddish saying that God made man because He loves stories. The Sensuous Hermit has a more refined version of that same essential idea. It's his contention that before the universe began there was only God—the One, the Absolute, the Unknown and Unknowable. But even God couldn't comprehend Himself in that condition. To be conscious of his Oneness, He had to be less than One. Thus was born two-ness, or duality, with all the attendant distractions of that condition: light and dark, life and death, good and evil, love and fear, oil and vinegar, and so on. The truth is, we're all still One with God, but at the moment we happen to be functioning as a kind of enchanted mirror that tells God stories about his true nature. Or better yet, the universe is one huge *roman à clef* in which the secret identity of every character is none other than the Absolute Author."*

ROAD OF EXCESS

Like I said, that's part of it. But here's a more radical spin on that same basic idea: What if mankind was once a single angelic being that fell from grace and was transformed, during the Big Bang, into the material universe as a means of salvation? What if shards of that fallen angelic personality could be found everywhere—in every rock, dinosaur, shark, tree, rainbow, bear, and person? And what if the ultimate purpose of all those fragmented personalities was to spiritually evolve into wholeness, back into that original angelic being—with increased knowledge of its own good and evil—which would in turn allow it to merge once more with the loving grace of the True God. If all of that were true, then we'd finally have a reasonable theological explanation for all the suffering in the world:

It's self-inflicted.

Why does evil shit happen? Because we need to experience it. We need to know what evil is all about so we can strive to embody its opposite: spiritual good. But in a world like I've described, we could never be quite sure of our moral bearings. We'd be living under Kierkegaard's dictum that when we're feeling our most saintly, we could actually be working for the devil (Jerry Falwell and some of the more rabid popes come to mind...). Conversely, an act that seems evil might actually serve to nudge millions of souls toward salvation. Christ's crucifixion would be the obvious example, but there are others. I'm not saying this is true, but what if I told you that every soul involved in the Holocaust actually volunteered for it?

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." That's another of Kierkegaard's dictums. It explains why we need to spend time on the Other Side between incarnations. We do it so we can kick back and take a long look at our lives and try to figure out what the hell has been going on.

DINKEY CREEK

In the morning, when Gordon wakes up inside the tent and smells the warm, dry air redolent of pine needles, his heart leaps in joy with the realization that he's no longer in Kingsburg, but camping instead at Dinkey Creek. There's an unfamiliar taste in his mouth from sleeping outdoors all night, and his hair feels stiffer—more like an animal's fur. These are good things. He can't wait to get up, but Jimmy is still sleeping, so he decides to stay in his sleeping bag and read for a while. He has a collection of W.H. Auden's poetry in his suitcase. He opens the book at random to a poem called "They":

*Where do they come from? Those whom we so much dread,
as on our dearest location falls the chill
of their crooked wing and endangers
the melting friend, the aqueduct, the flower.*

*Terrible Presences that the ponds reflect
back at the famous and, when the blond boy
bites eagerly into the shining
apple, emerge in their shocking fury,*

*and we realize the woods are deaf and the sky
nurses no one, and we are awake and these,
like farmers, have purpose and knowledge,
but towards us their hate is directed.*

*We are the barren pastures to which they bring
the resentment of outcasts; on us they work
out their despair; they wear our weeping
as the disgraceful badge of their exile.*

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There's more, but Gordon's mind is drifting off into thoughts about Archons and Overlords. *Is it true? Do dark powers really pursue us in this life? Are we at the mercy of 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air' (or some twisted Demiurge...) like Paul said?*

"Can't you keep your nose out of a book even while you're on vacation?" Jimmy is sitting up, scowling at Gordon from across the tent.

"I was waiting for you to get up."

"Well, I'm up. C'mon, let's go catch some fish."

Outside the tent, Mr. and Mrs. Marrsden have opened one of the Igloo coolers and set up a Coleman stove on top of a picnic table. They're cooking bacon, eggs, and french-fried potatoes. Mixed in with a whiff of campfire smoke on the pine-heavy air, it's the most delicious smell Gordon has ever experienced. Jimmy's mother hands the boys paper plates that become increasingly transparent with grease as she loads them up with food and everyone sits down to eat. Gordon rarely has an appetite, but today he's having the hungriest morning of his life. Maybe it's because he emptied the contents of his stomach at the entrance to Dinkey Creek. Or maybe it's because he's finally free of Kingsburg and his mother's indifferent cooking (*Open one can of Del Monte Creamed Corn. Heat in microwave. Serve with Wonder Bread and pre-packaged slices of Kraft's American cheese. Makes dinner for two*).

After breakfast the boys take their fishing gear and head for a swimming hole that Jimmy knows about called Honeymoon Pool. They follow a winding tar road past other campsites where parents and children interact with bird-like happiness, each little group twittering around a pile of ashes from the previous night's campfire. Gordon and Jimmy stride past them with their fishing rods held high on their shoulders. They're two young heroes ready to do some manly bartering with nature, each determined to catch enough trout to feed a whole family—and maybe some of their friendly neighbors as well.

Stepping off the road, Jimmy leads them along a narrow path over half-exposed tree roots and under branches until they come to a steep flight of concrete steps leading down the side of a gorge. The steps (138 in all, Gordon will count later) end on top of a distant gray boulder sitting astride two deep granite pools. The pools are fed by a series of waterfalls cascading through a mossy chute of stones. The smaller of the two pools, Jimmy promises, is always roiling with trout.

It'll be a long climb back up, thinks Gordon, feeling for his asthma inhaler. His lungs are already straining for more oxygen in the thin mountain air. He asks, "Are you sure this is the best place to fish?"

"Sometimes girls go nude sunbathing down there," Jimmy says with a smirk.

No more needs to be said. Gordon heads down the steps without any care as to whether he'll have enough lung-capacity for the trip back up.

The view on the way down reminds Gordon of those Chinese nature paintings brushed in ink on long scrolls by artists with names like Wu Hu and Yi Ha: elongated mountains, bonsai-looking trees growing from the sides of sheer cliffs, and maybe a fanciful pagoda or some wispy-bearded hermit smoking an opium pipe way off in the distance. Admittedly, Gordon doesn't see any drugged-out hermits nodding off in his immediate vicinity, but a magnificent bald eagle is riding the wind currents high above the canyon, which seems equally picturesque. It's a very Zen moment for him.

"Watch out for rattlers," Jimmy says.

"Rattlesnakes?" Gordon asks, suddenly fearful, remembering the snake from his dream.

"Yeah. They like to sun themselves on these steps."

So much for Zen. On closer inspection, that bald eagle turns out to be a turkey vulture. Squirrels chatter madly as screeching black ravens try to poke out their eyes in the scrub. In Gordon's anxious, overheating imagination, a scorpion suddenly lurks under every wildflower. Nature, he's reminded, is a calamity, a constant struggle for survival—"red in tooth and claw" as Tennyson said. It's hard to understand why a supposedly benevolent God would create a world in which the fundamental rule governing all life is: *Eat or be eaten*. Why can't we all get our sustenance from basking in sunlight and breathing clean air? Why do we have to shove once-living things down our throats and turn them into *turds*, of all things?

"It'd be cool if we saw a girl naked," Jimmy says, thinking out loud about a somewhat different aspect of nature.

It doesn't take Gordon long to agree with him. "However screwed up the world may be," he says, "at least God did one thing right when he invented naked women."

“Yeah, but even there he could have done a little better. He should have made it so they never get old and saggy. And what if they were a lot more horny for guys like us? I’ve had dreams about stuff like that.”

“That would be so great,” Gordon says, feeling a little dreamy himself. “And there should be no more sexually-transmitted diseases.”

“I know! That’s so screwed up. Sex is natural. You shouldn’t have to worry about catching something that’ll make you go blind or crazy every time you get it on. And pregnancies should be, like, totally controllable.”

Before they reach the bottom of the steps, the two would-be teen deities have laid out plans for a new earthly paradise. In their world, pepperoni pizzas will grow up from the ground like toadstools. Limitless quantities of imported beer will flow from taps in the trunk of every tree (Guinness Stout from Black Oaks, Löwenbräu from Lodgepole Pines, and so on...). No one will ever have to work, unless they want to, thanks to cheap robotics. Pain, sickness, and hunger will be unheard of and all the sadness and madness of the world will simply fade away. Due to an improved worldwide system of digestion, bowel movements will no longer be necessary, although pissing will be retained as an option, with greatly increased bladder capacity, allowing men to put out fires started by burning piles of autumn leaves—or to scrawl Emily Dickinson poems in the snow. Penises will be lengthened accordingly. All women will embody their own ideals of personal beauty and never have to grow old, so long as they promise to wear slutty underwear and refrain from excessive bitchery. Free love will be actively encouraged. Churches will be turned into public burlesque houses in which joy-filled striptease contests will take place every Tuesday and Thursday. Libraries will finally be recognized as the true churches, where angels communicate with mortals. The language barrier will dissolve and wars between nations will cease when every person on Earth discovers that he or she can communicate by instant telepathy. Telepathy will not turn out to be popular for ordinary conversation, however—because once you know what someone’s *really* thinking, you’ll usually wish they would just shut the hell up. (An experiment giving dogs and cats the power of speech will be abandoned for similar reasons.) Certain people will discover they can breathe at the bottom of the ocean like lobsters or fly through the air

like owls, while others will become unbeatable at Scrabble. Everyone will accomplish at least one feat in his or her lifetime that was previously thought to be impossible. A universe run by teenage gods should be fun and challenging, above all else, but not *too* challenging, so no one feels left out. Stoners, jocks, and Certified Public Accountants will all have their place—but people like Joseph Coors and other greedy industrialists and corrupt politicians who've been trying to ruin the planet might have to atone for their sins by living as horticulturist monks for a few thousand years. It could take a generation or two before everything is completely cleared up, but by then life will be much more worth living. No one will ever want to die, but if they do, they'll have the consolation of being reincarnated. A quick tour of heaven and then they'll head right back, because Earth will be where the action's at.

The boys are still thinking up ways to right the wrongs in a malign universe when they see an old woman at the bottom of the steps. It's almost supernatural, the way she just appeared out of nowhere, but she looks real enough. She's wearing a faded pink sweatshirt with an iron-on decal of a moose ambling across her sagging bosom (no bra), and dirty white painter's pants. A San Francisco Giants baseball cap hides most of her stringy gray hair. She's carrying a Fiberglas bait-casting rod and at her feet there's a plastic five-gallon bucket half-full of water and flopping fish.

"I hope you boys brought along more than one kind of bait," she says, not bothering to say hello first. "Those picky little fishies just turned up their noses at my salmon eggs this morning. You want some apple?" She pulls a green apple out of her pocket and offers it to Gordon.

"Um, sure. Thanks," Gordon says politely, reaching for the apple. The old woman takes a bite out of it first. She chews in that zestful, loose-lipped way old people chew when they're trying to show a youngster how good something tastes—or how good life seems to them in general. Gordon observes a white froth of juice dribbling down her age-spotted chin as if she's just had a stroke. She hands him the apple and he takes a bite out of the side she hasn't slobbered on—not that he's afraid of old lady germs, but still... it pays to be careful.

"Hellgrammites are what caught these," the old woman says, kicking the bucket to stir up her fish. "I'd give you some, but I ran out."

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Gordon tries to hand the apple back to her, but she won't take it. She gives him a finger-wag bye-bye instead.

"Thanks for the tip!" Jimmy says to her with a used-car salesman's grin. When she bends over to pick up her bucket, he makes an exaggerated show of checking out her bony old ass. As she totters up the steps, wishing them luck, Jimmy whispers to Gordon: "Not exactly what we were hoping for in the nude sunbathing department...."

"Not hardly. What the hell are hellgrammites, anyway?"

"Hell if I know. It could be a made-up word. That old lady's probably nuts."

They walk to the far end of the boulder and sit down on a ledge that juts out over the water like a stone sofa. Two fat, somnolent trout hang motionless in the glass green depths just beneath them. Gordon looks out over the two pools, noting the beauty of the shimmering, soft-focus reflections of boulders and trees along their edges and the chute of waterfalls in the near distance. It's the closest thing he's ever seen to Paradise—not counting his out-of-body experiences.

Jimmy opens his creel and they get down to business. He shows Gordon how to thread a barbed brass hook along the inner skin of a salmon egg, so the entire hook follows the egg's curvature and is buried inside it. "That way, they can't steal the bait," he says, admiring his own handiwork. "If a trout wants the egg, he has to swallow this, too. Then you just yank on your line and the hook snags right in that fucker's throat."

"So violent!" marvels Gordon. "I wonder if that's what Jesus was thinking when he told the disciples he'd make them fishers of men." In his mind's eye, Gordon sees the twelve disciples out on the shore of a big lake, each of them with a surfcasting rod bent almost double from line-tension. They're cursing in Aramaic as their reels whine and screech. Out on the water, naked men explode from the green surface like marlins. Their feet splash like powerful tails as they thrash in midair, trying to shake free of the hooks snagged in their bearded jaws. It all takes place under a soaring, flamingo-colored sky with Jesus watching from a lifeguard tower. A transistor radio in the Son of God's lap is tuned to a tinny version of "Spinning Wheels" by Blood, Sweat & Tears—even though that can't be historically accurate. And why is the Easter Bunny playing volleyball against the Three Wise Men? And

shouldn't they be wearing something more than just leopard skin bikinis?

Jimmy, to his astonishment, imagines *exactly the same thing*—right down to the Easter Bunny—but he doesn't tell Gordon about it, so they'll never know their minds were linked.

They cast their lines out into the pool. For a while, nothing happens. Gordon's mind starts to drift. He makes an associative leap to the opening lines from the first book he ever read, *McElligot's Pool* by Dr. Seuss:

*"Young man," laughed the farmer,
"You're sort of a fool!
You'll never catch fish
In McElligot's Pool!"*

He thinks about fishing as a metaphor for hauling up wisdom—and monsters—from the depths of the imagination; the little pool of the individual psyche connected by an underground river to the vast ocean of the collective unconscious.

*"If I wait long enough,
If I'm patient and cool,
Who knows what I'll catch
In McElligot's Pool."*

Gordon looks down at the two grey trout still hanging suspended in the gently undulating water below the ledge. A dark hole is off to their left below the rocks, a cavern large enough to house an underwater grizzly bear. What sort of razor-toothed demon trout or man-eating catfish might be lurking in there? Gordon starts thinking he should drop his line right in front of the cave's entrance. At least he might catch one of the two trout, if not something stranger. But then that old Nietzschean fishing adage comes into play: *Stare long enough at fish near an abyss, and the fish or the abyss will stare back at you*. Both trout shudder and dart away toward the shadowy depths.

Bored, Jimmy reels in his line. Gordon does the same. The pink salmon eggs are still there, looking a little pale and waterlogged now on the ends of their hooks. Just to give themselves something to do, they

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replace the eggs with fresh ones and cast again. Hours pass—or so it seems. The fish aren't biting.

Finally, out of frustration, Gordon ties the glittery chrome and red striped Number Two Dang Samuel Gill-Buster to the end of his line. Jimmy says dismissively, "The only thing you'll catch with that is weeds."

"Screw you..." Gordon tells him, "this Number Two Dang Samuel Gill-Buster is a totally bitchin' lure. Trout can't resist it."

As if to prove him right, almost as soon as Gordon casts the lure, a trout strikes it.

"Snag him! Snag him!" Jimmy shouts, practically jumping out of his pants.

"He's already snagged!" Gordon shouts back at him.

"Reel it in! Reel it in!"

"I'm already reeling!"

The end of Gordon's fishing pole is bent in a parabola, the taut line quivering like a plucked harp string. It feels as if he's been leashed to a dachshund-sized torpedo. Even as he tries to reel in, the drag wheel lets out more line with a crotchety shrieking.

Out in the pool, a pale triangle of water travels up the line as it shears across the surface like a shark's fin. The line swerves toward the far shore, then races back in a powerful arc. As the line slackens, Gordon reels it in for all he's worth. In a swath of sunlight illuminating green water over a sandy bottom, the boys get their first glimpse of the fish. It's not the swift, grotesque lake monster Gordon was hoping for, but instead a very large Rainbow Trout—which for eating purposes is probably better.

As the initial burst of adrenaline dissipates through Gordon's nervous system, the trout, too, seems to tire a little. It swims closer to the ledge and Gordon is able to reel it up to the surface and toward him. It arrives skip-flapping frantically across the top of the water. Jimmy grabs the end of the line and hoists the big trout hand-over-hand the final distance.

It's a magnificent fish. There's something even noble about it, with its moss green back and silver flanks awash in pink and blue streaks dappled with pewter. Gordon's first impulse is to put it back in the water. He thinks about how long such a fish must have survived to

reach its length of almost eighteen inches. He sees it navigating secret creek channels, eating delicious flies and mudworms, maybe composing trout haiku by night beneath swaying stalks of moonlit cattails—only to die at the hands of two hick kids from Kingsburg.

“I can’t wait to eat this fish,” Jimmy says. Addressing it directly, he squeals: “You’re gonna be so yummy!”

“Maybe we should let it go,” Gordon suggests.

“No way!”

“It’s my fish. I caught him.”

“You wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for me. Anyway, look... his lip is broken.”

Gordon looks. Torn by the lure’s treble hook, the lower section of the trout’s translucent white jaw hangs halfway off its gasping face. How did he miss that? It makes him feel sick to look at it. Worse, it reminds him of his last vision of his father: a torso strapped to a pilot’s seat with his tongue hanging loose where his chin should have been. Gordon feels his arms going limp at his sides. He has to sit down quickly so he doesn’t fall into the water and drown. As his vision narrows to a dark tunnel and all the sounds of nature blur into one gigantic crystalline humming, Gordon feels the cool surface of the boulder pressing against his shoulders, steadying him. Narcolepsy won’t have him this time. A few moments pass and he returns to his senses.

“He can’t feed himself that way,” Jimmy is saying. “We should put him out of his misery.”

“Okay,” Gordon says. He forces himself to watch as Jimmy takes a knife and saws open the trout’s belly from its gills to its dorsal slit. Digging two fingers deep inside the quivering fish, Jimmy scrapes out a mess of pink entrails and flings them over the ledge.

“Don’t worry,” Jimmy says. “They don’t feel pain like we do.”

“Yeah, right. If that fish could talk, he’d be calling you a motherfucker.”

Jimmy motions for him to take a closer look. “See this channel of blood here, along the spine? You have to scrape that out, too, or the meat will go bad. Then you just wash everything out with water real good and you’re all set.”

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So now Gordon knows how to properly gut and clean a trout. He'll have a deeper understanding of his Mrs. Paul's Frozen Fish Sticks the next time his mother serves them for dinner.

Jimmy pinches off the torn piece of trout lip from the Number Two Dang Samuel Gill-Buster and tells Gordon to cast again. "You just got lucky," he says. "I can't believe any self-respecting fish would go anywhere near that shiny piece of junk."

Again, as soon as the lure touches water, another fish strikes. This time Gordon doesn't meet quite so much resistance while reeling it in. It's a more normal-sized trout, about nine or ten inches. "Perfect for pan-frying," says Jimmy. "It's a keeper!"

Gordon swallows hard and guts the fish himself, trying to regard all that slimy viscera as just one quick step toward a nice pan-fried trout dinner. He does it to avoid looking squeamish in front of his best friend. He also sincerely wants to please Jimmy's parents. After all, they're the ones providing him with this fabulous vacation. He can at least supply their dinner. If a few fish have to pay with their lives for that experience, then so be it.

In that same spirit of gratitude, Gordon offers the magical lure to Jimmy, saying, "Here. Go ahead and cast it a few times. I'll open up the cheese-flavored eggs and see if they like those any better."

By noon, the Number Two Dang Samuel Gill-Buster has provided both boys with their legal limits of ten fish apiece.

They ascend the steps like victorious gladiators, their fishing poles held aloft like pikes impaling the invisible heads of their enemies. Gordon counts the steps along the way up. Feeling worthy for a change, he manages the climb without having to stop and wheeze for air. Another triumph.

At the top, where the campground road meets the forest path, a bearded man in a black leather jacket rides toward them on a customized Harley-Davidson. The big chrome motorcycle with its slung-back handlebars chugs past them in a slow, echoing roar, then pulls over just a few yards ahead of them. Muscular legs in faded jeans plant themselves on either side of the bike and push it backward with an awkward hop. Suddenly, Gordon and Jimmy aren't feeling so much like gladiators anymore. The winged, grinning skull patch on the back

of the black jacket identifies the rider as a member of the Oakland chapter of the Hells Angels.

“You boys been doin’ some fishin’?”

The Midwestern drawl reassures Gordon a little, reminding him of his friendship with Johnny Hoss. But according to newspaper accounts he’s read, the Hells Angels are the most vicious and violent motorcycle gang in America. They knifed that guy at the Rolling Stones concert in Altamont. They snort crystal meth and shoot guns at each other just for the wild frontier fuck of it. They even kicked the crap out of one of Gordon’s literary heroes: the fearless gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson. So he’s somewhat anxious when the Harley rolls up next to them and he sees Jimmy’s reflection in the black teardrop gas tank and his own in the Hells Angel’s brown-tinted aviator shades. Gordon says, “We, um, fished for a few hours this morning. We did okay.”

“We both caught our limits!” Jimmy brags. And it wasn’t even his lure! Acting like a spazz, Jimmy opens his creel and holds it up to the man’s shaggy face.

“Whoa! That’s some fine-lookin’ fish you got there!” the Hells Angel says, jerking his head back as if dazzled by their bounty. He takes off his sunglasses. He has the craggy good looks of a character out of the old West—a hard-working blacksmith, maybe, or that guy from *Grizzly Adams*.

“Do you want some?” Gordon asks, opening his own creel to show more trout neatly stacked like fat, silvery cigars. “We’ve got more than we need, really.” He tries to make it sound like a magnanimous offer to share, rather than an act of sheer, simpering cravenness.

“Yeah, take a few,” Jimmy chimes in, his voice a little higher than usual. “We’ll just catch more tomorrow.”

“That’s mighty generous of you boys. Nothin’ I like better than pan-fried trout.” Not shy, the big man takes two from Jimmy’s creel, and three from Gordon’s, holding the trout delicately between his thick fingers. The skin of his hand is elaborately traced with spidery veins of black motorcycle grease.

“D’you have somethin’ to carry ‘em in?” Jimmy asks, unconsciously slipping into a Midwestern drawl of his own.

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"I'll just stick 'em in my jacket here. Won't make it smell any worse."

As the jacket's pockets are being stuffed with trout, Jimmy points to the patch on the back and asks, "Are you a real Hells Angel?"

"Yep! Came down from Oakland on my bike here. We're all havin' us a little summer get-together. Name's MacDuff." MacDuff smiles, showing surprisingly good teeth. He reaches over to shake their hands.

"I'm Gordon."

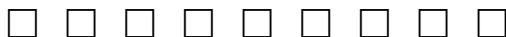
"Jimmy."

"Well, I'm mighty obliged, boys. Tell you what. We're havin' us a wingding over at the Trail's End Tavern tonight. Why don't you come on by? Jus' tell 'em you're friends of ol' Duffy. They'll let you right in."

"Okay!"

"Cool!"

MacDuff gives them a thumbs-up. Then he rides off on his Harley with a stuttering thunder that seems to shake every pine needle in the forest. Gordon and Jimmy just stand there staring after him, astonished and impressed. For them, it's like having the Norse god Thor as a new friend.



The Trail's End Tavern is a ramshackle one-room cabin with a bar, a jukebox, and a knife-scarred pool table. It sits at the far end of the campground overlooking a section of Dinkey Creek that passes through a deep ravine. Gordon and Jimmy walk there while it's still light out, after a festive trout dinner. Jimmy's parents had complimented them on their catch several times throughout the day and now seemed inclined to let them go anywhere, although Jimmy decided not to trouble them with the knowledge that he and Gordon were off to a party with the Hells Angels. They were supposed to be roasting marshmallows with some other kids down by the creek.

Several Harley-Davidsons are parked along the side of the tavern. Loud rock-and-roll blasts from the rusty window screens. Gordon and Jimmy stand on the porch near the open doorway, unnoticed, breathing in the rank atmosphere of mildew and corruption (smells of

cigarette butts in drained beer bottles, unpainted lumber, spilt whiskey, old popcorn, and stale sweat). They search the interior for MacDuff. He isn't there.

A man with a giant rust-red afro glances up at them from the pool table as he's leaning over to line up a shot. His face is so white that he looks scarily like an albino, but the scary effect is modulated somewhat by stoned blue eyes and a goofy, Howdy-Doody grin. "Hey, little dudes!" the albinoid man says, waving his cue stick at them. "You here to shoot some pool?"

"We're looking for Duffy," says Jimmy.

"Oh! I know who you are! The little fisher dudes! I had one of those trout you gave MacDuff for lunch. He's not here yet, but hang out. It's cool. My name's Corky."

Gordon decides there's very little that's intimidating about Corky, aside from his skin tone. Although Corky is wearing a Hells Angels jacket, the rest of his clothes look like they once belonged to Jimi Hendrix: tight bell bottom pants with purple and orange stripes, a cigarette-burned T-shirt advertising Mr. Zog's Sex Wax, and a blue silk scarf knotted around his scrawny neck. The other Hells Angels standing over by the bar look much tougher, but at the moment Corky seems to be their leader—or maybe not so much a leader as the Hells Angels equivalent of a court jester.

"Do either of you guys shoot pool?" Corky asks again.

"We both do," Gordon says.

Corky hands Gordon a cue stick. "I'll rack," he says. "Should we play for bets? Like, two dollars to start?"

Gordon and Jimmy just nod their heads.

Back in Kingsburg, Gordon and Jimmy—*especially* Jimmy—have reputations as pool sharks. They've been shooting pool at the Kingsburg arcade since the fifth grade (individually at first, and more recently as a team) and at this point in their lives they practically own the table. Even high school seniors can't beat them on it. Both of them can run through all the balls several times before missing a shot. For Gordon it's simple geometry, but when Jimmy picks up a cue stick, it's like he's *possessed*. Both of them are pleased to see that the pool table at the Trail's End looks very similar to the table they're used to shooting

on. They hope to win some easy money—and earn the Hells Angels’ respect.

Gordon’s break is fast and hard, the cue ball bouncing a little after it sends the other balls caroming around the table. Four balls land in the pockets, three of them solids. Gordon sinks another solid in the side pocket, making sure to set up for his next shot. The noise of the room fades away as he concentrates. The next three balls go in without much trouble, and then he lucks out with a long bank shot and sinks the eight ball. *Two dollars.*

Corky congratulates him and racks again. The stakes go up higher. Although Gordon’s break sends balls careening everywhere, nothing goes in the pockets. Corky gets a turn. He runs three balls, then blows the fourth shot on a miscue, trying for too much backspin. Jimmy gets his turn and runs the table. *Five dollars.*

Corky offers to buy Gordon and Jimmy a beer.

Two hours later, Gordon and Jimmy have drunk five beers apiece, but they’re still winning. The atmosphere inside the tavern has turned rowdy, with Hells Angels crowded around the pool table shouting and laughing, all of them in line to win their money back just as soon as the two junior pool sharks get drunk enough to lose.

“You guys feel drunk yet?” Corky asks Jimmy, shouting to be heard. There’s a hopeful look in his dazed blue eyes.

“No fuckin’ way!” Jimmy shouts back like a young pirate, clanking his can of Coors against Corky’s Budweiser.

“This stuff goes down like water!” Gordon yells, feeling a powerful buzz as he chugs a Löwenbräu. *I could take Corky in a fight right now*, he thinks. *Maybe I should be a Hells Angel.* Feeling invincible, he gets a little fancy and puts the cue stick behind his back, then sits on the table and drops the eight ball dead-bang in the corner pocket. *Fifty dollars.*

A sort of incoherent cheer rises up through the crowd. At first Gordon thinks it’s for his fancy shot, but then some leather jackets move aside and MacDuff steps up to the pool table, looking grimy but regal—a bandit king down from his high mountain fortress. Gordon and Jimmy fall all over him.

“MacDuff!”

“Hey, man! Where were you?”

"We missed you, man!"

MacDuff gives them a big smile—*such beautiful teeth!*—and high-fives them both. "You boys up for another game?" he asks, racking the balls.

"Hell yeah!"

"We haven't lost yet!"

"How much've you made so far?"

"Five hundred and thirty-three dollars!"

"You're shittin' me!"

"You Hells Angels can't shoot pool worth a crap! We're rich!"

Shaking his head with a grin, MacDuff points a finger and says, "Have you two fellas met up with Francesca yet?" Two barrel-chested Hells Angels with matching Fu Manchu mustaches stand in front of the bar where MacDuff is pointing. A "Free Sonny Barger" bumpersticker is pasted on the mirror behind them. At MacDuff's signal the two men uncross their bulging arms and step aside, revealing a gorgeous girl sitting on top of the bar in a leopard skin bikini top and cut-off jeans. She has long, wavy red hair, perky breasts, and a wide, full mouth with a witchy grin. Best of all, she's only around fifteen—*way* out of their league.

"Holy shit!" Jimmy says.

"What a fox," utters Gordon.

"Aw, ain't she *purty*..." Corky says, pretending to drool.

Francesca hops down off the bar and makes her way over to Gordon and Jimmy. She's adorably barefoot. "I hear you guys are pool sharks," she says. "Win this one for me and I'll show you my tits." She cups her hands under her breasts and squeezes them in front of Gordon, just to give him some idea of what's in store. Gordon feels his arms going weak at his sides. *Please, God, don't let me pass out now*, he prays.

At the same time, Jimmy's brain is going into synaptic overload as he checks out Francesca from behind. Peach-shaped, perfect butt cheeks peek out from under the fringe along the bottom edge of her cut-offs. Embroidered on those cut-offs, between the two pockets, is a depiction of the red-bearded cartoon character, Yosemite Sam, with

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six-shooters pointed east and west, blazing. *I'd trade my life right now to be Yosemite Sam*, thinks Jimmy, not thinking very clearly.

"Okay," MacDuff says, "so who's gonna break?"



Being drunk turns time and space into a smeary blur. At least that's Gordon's perception. One minute he's bending over his cue stick lining up a shot at the far end of the table; the next minute, he's standing near a bonfire at the Hells Angels' camp—with Jimmy and Corky and Francesca—feeling like a depraved Boy Scout. In-between, he had a vision of the pool table elongating to an impossible distance—too far for the cue ball to travel—and a song on the jukebox started skipping on and off, so that Gordon feared he was going deaf and psychotic all at once. Then he stood up and remembered: *Oh yeah, I'm drunk.*

(He and Jimmy also had contact highs from all the pot smoking going on in the tavern, but they didn't know that yet. Corky, in fact, had been taking tokes off a hand-rolled cigarette and blowing smoke right into their faces, but neither Gordon nor Jimmy had any idea it was Humboldt sinsemilla. That was the key to the mystery of Corky's acceptance among the Hells Angels: he was their drug dealer.)

Someone has set up a guitar amp near the bonfire and a trippy song is coming from the speakers—soaring, psychedelic guitars sounding like the swimming patterns of deep sea fish in slow motion; drums that must have been recorded in an echoing cavern full of stalactites. Above it all, a plaintive male voice sings about a woman in blue jeans and how he wants her, *like a kangaroo*. It's the best song Gordon has ever heard and even though he doesn't know who's singing it (Alex Chilton, fronting the band Big Star) or what it's called ("Kangaroo"), he's absolutely sure he'll remember that song forever because it somehow perfectly captures his longing for Francesca.

She's like a wood nymph glowing in the firelight and that song has doomed him. Every time Gordon hears it in the future, he'll think of Francesca and remember how desperately—how drunkenly—he longed for her. No other moment in his life will ever seem as

passionate, or as pure, because everything that comes after will be tainted by sexual experience and love's myriad disappointments. For Gordon, Francesca is the last embodiment of the ideal, archetypal girlfriend. No other woman in his life will ever be able to live up to her.

"God! I can't believe we lost all that money," Jimmy says, staring at Francesca's ideal, archetypal ass.

"I think you guys got distracted," Corky says, blowing smoke.

"I think they got wasted," says Francesca.

"No way, *José!*" Gordon shouts, doing his best to impress.

Jimmy yelps, "I'm not even buzzed yet!"

"Really? Prove it." Demonstrating as she goes, Francesca says, "Lean your heads back as far as you can and touch your noses."

Gordon and Jimmy dutifully do as they're told. Corky follows their lead, just to practice for the next time he gets pulled over by the Highway Patrol.

"If you fall down," Francesca informs them, "you're drunk."

Gordon and Jimmy, of course, fall on the ground. Corky staggers backward and crashes against the bonfire, setting his afro ablaze. For a moment he just stands there swaying like a burning dandelion seed, not even calling for help. Then he drops to his knees and starts rubbing his head in the dirt, trying to put it out. Suddenly MacDuff is right there, unzipping his pants. An impressive golden geyser rains down on Corky's flaming head, extinguishing it in seconds.

"Sorry about that, Cork. But don't ever go sayin' I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire," MacDuff says in his gruff voice.

Corky rolls over flat on his back and looks up at MacDuff through stoned but grateful eyes. "Thanks, man," he says. "You're the best." He reaches up to touch his still-smoking scalp. A charred hunk of afro breaks off in his hand like a piece of burnt toast. "Oh dude..." Corky laments, "how am I gonna score chicks without my 'fro?"

"You'll always knock 'em dead no matter what, you albino jackass..." MacDuff zips up and pretends to boot Corky in the head, then he strides off into the darkness.

"MacDuff's so cool," Jimmy says as he stands up and brushes himself off.

"Yeah, he's definitely the big dog around here," Francesca says.

"Nurse..." Corky croaks. Francesca looks over at him as he sits up and puts his fingers in front of his lips as if smoking a tiny, imaginary cigar. His hair is a black, knotted mess—he looks like a lightning-struck Rastafarian, actually—but he doesn't seem to be burned anywhere else.

"So—" Francesca says, "you guys wanna smoke some hooter?"

"What's that?" Gordon asks from the ground, where he's decided to stay, because the world seems less blurry down there.

Francesca pulls a joint from her leopard skin bikini top. "You know.... Grass. Pot. Mary Jane."

"Oh, the Devil's Weed!" Jimmy grins. "Sure. Hell yeah!"

"I've got asthma. I better not."

"This is supposed to be great for asthma. You should try it." Francesca fires up the joint with a chrome Yosemite Sam lighter. She passes it to Jimmy, who takes a toke, coughs, and blows out all the smoke. "You're supposed to hold it in," Francesca says. She takes the joint back for another hit, then passes it to Gordon.

Gordon can feel everyone watching him. His eyes are on the joint. One end burns, staining the rolling paper a nasty yellow-brown; the other end is twisted and mashed, wet with saliva—Francesca's saliva (*and a little of Jimmy's, unfortunately...*). Putting the joint in his mouth would be the next best thing to kissing her, thinks Gordon. So who cares if he turns into a dope fiend or loses his mind in a drug-induced fit of paranoia? He'll do anything to impress that girl. Trying to act nonchalant, Gordon puts the joint to his lips and takes a long puff.

As smoke wafts out of her delicate nostrils, Francesca says, "Gordon's got it down. See?" He's holding it in like a pro. It's not all that different from inhaling asthma medication, after all.

"Let's not Bogart that..." Corky says, taking the joint from Gordon. He takes a baby puff to fire the little coal at the end brighter, and then he inhales twice, fiercely. The joint crackles and pops. Holding the smoke in his lungs with great effort, Corky passes the joint back to Jimmy.

"No thanks. That stuff's too raspy for me."

"Get out," Francesca says, snatching the joint from him. "This is top-grade Humboldt sinsemilla. I only smoke the best, right Cork?"

Smoke explodes from Corky's throat. "Right," he croaks, wiping his reddened eyes. "I should know. I sold it to her." He puts his head down in his lap and coughs like a yogi with emphysema.

Francesca places the joint between her witchy lips and takes a long toke. Then she passes it to Gordon.

"This hooter seems okay to me," he says, regarding the joint like a fine cigar. "Better than Primatene, by a long shot."

"You're my man, Gordon," Francesca says, making him glow.

Actually, Gordon feels like he may be glowing a little too much. Something odd is definitely happening to him. He's losing contact with his body, as if he's sitting under an icy waterfall. He also thinks he can see auras. Everyone is shimmering with color. Corky's aura is mostly blue with hints of green and a black spot where his afro should have been. Jimmy is all reds and yellows, with an angry cast of pink across his forehead. And Francesca is beautiful, like a rainbow, with a fount of purple gushing from the top of her head and transforming into fireworks of the most brilliant pure white light Gordon has ever seen.

"Wow, you're glowing," he tells her. That doesn't come close to describing what he actually sees, but it's the best he can do under the circumstances.

"Headrush!" Francesca giggles. She does a pirouette in front of the bonfire. Sparks surge up behind her in a tower and trailing images follow her. Gordon wonders if anyone else can see them.

"Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?" he asks her.

"Which kind of witch do you want me to be?"

"Good," Gordon answers.

"Bad," Jimmy cuts in.

"I can be both," Francesca says.

Thunder rumbles through the shadowy trees behind them. A dozen eerie, jittering balls of light dart through the black branches, headed toward the bonfire. At first Gordon thinks it's some kind of supernatural trouble—Archons on the warpath—but then he sees it's just the headlights on a herd of Harleys riding up to join them. As the lead motorcycle nears the bonfire's flames, he makes out MacDuff.

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“We’re headin’ up to the cliffs for a look at the stars,” MacDuff says, coming to a stop. “Who wants to ride with me?”

Flinging her long red hair to one side like a scarf, Francesca hops on the back of the Harley without hesitating. Seeing her bare legs straddling MacDuff’s big machine makes Gordon feel suddenly inadequate. His newfound sense of stoner virility dissipates like a puff of pot smoke.

MacDuff turns to Corky and says, “Hey Cork, how ‘bout you follow us with Gordon and Jim there in your Bug? If you get lost, we’ll be on the far side of the creek up top of Honeymoon Pool.”

“C’mon, you guys,” Corky says. “This should be good.” He leads Gordon and Jimmy over to a Pepto-Bismol pink Volkswagen Bug parked behind one of the tents. “Go on. Get in,” he says. “I just hope I’m not too fucked-up to drive.”

Gordon thinks, *Even if you are, I’d rather crash in this thing than riding on the back of a motorcycle.* The interior of the Volkswagen smells like an old lawnmower. As Gordon climbs into the backseat, his foot bumps against a can of Quaker State 30-weight motor oil, reminding him of an old masturbatory disaster. There’s also a racy blue can of STP on the floor and a red plastic funnel wrapped in greasy newspaper. The Bug must burn a lot of oil.

“What a crappy car!” Jimmy says from the front, giving Corky shit. “Why would you even drive this faggy piece of junk? Are you broke?”

“I drive it so I won’t get pulled over by the cops.”

“It’s like some ugly hippie girl’s car....”

“Exactly!” The Volkswagen’s engine starts with a tubercular roar. Bearings rattle like dice in a ceramic cup. Talking above the noise, Corky says, “It barely even goes the speed limit, so mostly the cops just ignore me. Which is great, since I’m usually hauling massive amounts of drugs.”

“You’re a drug dealer?” Gordon asks, secretly thrilled to be in such perilous company. That’s one of the great things about the Hells Angels: they make moral failings look like fun.

Corky asks rhetorically, “Would an ugly hippie girl have a stereo like this?” He twists a knob on a sophisticated-looking black panel built into the Volkswagen’s dash. The spooky electronic organ and glissando guitar solo that opens Pink Floyd’s “Shine On You Crazy

Diamond” fills the interior with the ambience of a concert resonating inside a cathedral. “That’s a top-of-the-line Blaupunkt with a 200-watt amp and JBL speakers,” Corky shouts. “I’ve even got a subwoofer under the backseat.”

No kidding. Gordon can feel the subwoofer vibrating through his skinny butt on the low notes. It’s the best stereo system he’s ever heard. As Corky puts the Volkswagen in gear and lets out the clutch, his coolness in Gordon’s estimation goes up considerably.

The VW lurches over a log (or someone’s leg) and scuttles onto the road leading out of the campground. The engine’s fuzzy chugging rousts an owl from its perch. It goes lunging across the beams of their headlights like a Doberman pinscher chasing after a bobcat.

The music is too impressively loud for conversation. After about ten minutes of driving through the dark, Corky turns down the stereo and says, “We’re almost there.” He steers the VW off the paved road. It bounces along a rutted dirt trail that ends in a dark meadow. Dozens of the Hells Angels’ Harleys are parked between two picnic benches illumined in the Bug’s headlights. The Hells Angels themselves are somewhere else, beyond the light’s reach.

Someone howls like a coyote as Corky and Jimmy get out of the car and head into the darkness beyond the picnic tables. It takes Gordon a little longer to climb out of the backseat. He has to run to catch up with the others. Wet weeds lash against his bare legs. The night smells green. As Gordon’s eyes adjust to the moonlight, he sees the Hells Angels up ahead, gathered near the edge of a cliff. MacDuff sits on his Harley among them, tilting his head back to admire the starry night. The coyote howl is coming from him.

After MacDuff finishes his lonesome barking, there’s some laconic talk about it being a perfect night for a little black magic. “Anyone up for sacrificing a virgin?” Corky asks as he walks up to them. A wave of sinister laughter erupts from the other Hells Angels after MacDuff adds: “Not that any of *you* guys’d qualify.”

Gordon sees Francesca standing off by herself, a few yards from the main group. He goes over to join her. He’s still seeing auras, but they’re no more than pale shimmers now, like the iridescent scum made by old motor oil in a puddle of rainwater. Jimmy, tagging along

behind him, no longer has an aura at all—he just seems to be roiling with inner heat.

“It’s goddam beautiful up here,” Francesca says as they come up beside her. She’s standing right at the cliff’s edge. When Gordon looks beyond her bare feet, his knees shudder with vertigo. It’s a very long way down. The creek is just a tiny black ribbon glinting in the starlight. Honeymoon Pool, directly below them, looks like two wet inkblots on a Rorschach test. The Moon reflects on the water like a milky, blind eye in the shadowed face of an oracle—some black-cloaked goddess masquerading as a crone. Francesca is right. It’s goddam beautiful.

“Shit, how far down do you think it is?” Jimmy asks of no one in particular.

Gordon does some quick calculations. He counted 138 steps on the way back up from their fishing excursion. Each step was around eight inches high, so for every three steps, that’s two feet. One-hundred-and-thirty-eight divided by three then multiplied by two.... “It’s around 92 feet,” Gordon says, “if this cliff is as high as the other side.”

“I’ll bet it’s even higher,” Jimmy says. He looks over at MacDuff, who seems to be looking back at them a little too intently. “Hey MacDuff,” he asks, “has anyone ever jumped in the creek from here?”

“And lived? Doubt it.”

Francesca hugs Gordon from behind and says, loud enough for everyone to hear: “I’ll do it if you do it.”

She’s kidding, right? Just the thought of jumping almost makes Gordon retch, but he doesn’t want to look like a chicken in front of all those Hells Angels. *She’ll never do it, anyway. No one could be that crazy....* Teenage bravado forces him to say, “Sure. You go first.”

Even before the words are out of Gordon’s mouth, he knows he’s in trouble. He sees a madly hopping collection of colored lights scooting out from under MacDuff’s Harley. Those airborne splashes of neon pink, tungsten blue, and electric yellow seem all too familiar when they dance across the hummocky grass and leap onto Francesca, where they coalesce into the shape of a transparent cartoon rabbit. It’s that ass-kicking Easter Bunny all over again! In the middle of July, which seems incredibly unfair. Now Gordon knows he’s *really* screwed.

Francesca, of course, puts her hind legs together and does a little bunny hop right off the cliff's edge.

"*Ohgodohgodohgod...*" Gordon thinks. His mind takes a snapshot of Francesca's Yosemite Sam embroidered ass jack-knifing in midair. He's horrified. Astounded. His arms are going limp. He can't feel his face. He waits for the wet smack, the crunch of breaking bones, the yip of pain before death. Instead, he hears a tiny splash and then Francesca's thin voice calls up to him: "C'mon in, the water's fine!"

Hell isn't such a warm place, after all.

Every Hells Angel suddenly looks like a greasy, leather-clad vampire. Some of them have even acquired protruding fangs and crooked, blackened wings. Gordon is seeing with his third eye wide open and it's freaking him the fuck out.

In his mind, Gordon backs up and jumps off the cliff with a running start and a scream. Everyone else just sees him topple over the edge like a felled tree. Rather than a full-blown narcoleptic collapse, this time he's experiencing something akin to a vivid form of sleepwalking.

As Gordon plummets, the granite cliff he's rushing past becomes a movie screen on which the film of his life is projected at a million times normal speed. He sees every moment of his past and future, but it all goes by so quickly that he can't commit anything to memory. One insight, however, will stick with him: that place the Tibetans call the *Bardo*—the dreamscape where all souls rise or fall depending on their merits—it's not just on the other side of death. It's earthly life as well.

The Moon's reflection through a haze of stars rises up to meet Gordon. And when he flicks his eye, the Moon explodes.

Splash, terror, water—and Gordon's awake, he's alive—but maybe not for long. He's drowning. He's underwater and everything is dark. Then his foot touches gravel and he reflexively pushes himself up. When he breaks to the surface in a surge of icy bubbles, he feels as if he's been reborn.

As the water clears from his ears, Gordon hears Hells Angels laughing far above him. Francesca swims over to where he's treading water and holds up her hands as if describing a tiny fish that got away. "You missed the boulders by this much," she says with her witchy grin. Then she kisses him. It's a sweet, lingering kiss. Gordon's first. It

makes every horrible experience that led him there suddenly seem worthwhile. The next time his mother asks him, “If your friend jumps off a cliff, does that mean you have to do it, too?” his answer will be, indisputably, “Yes!”

He and Francesca swim over to the other side of Honeymoon Pool and climb the 138 steps to the top. They walk hand-in-hand along the campground road, talking about their lives in a haphazard way—astrological signs, favorite characters on *Gilligan’s Island*, books they’ve both read, the possibility of life existing in other parts of the universe. Gordon tells the story of his father’s recent death in an airplane crash and Francesca doesn’t disappoint him by reacting to it in that fake adult way most teenagers fall into when the subject of funerals comes around; instead, her response is genuinely warm and human. By the time they arrive at Gordon and Jimmy’s empty tent, Gordon is hopelessly, insanely, idiotically in love. He wants to fly away to Paris with Francesca and live there with her forever. They’ll get an elegant little apartment on the Île de la Cité with a windowed terrace overlooking the twin bell towers of Notre-Dame. They’ll pass their days eating in fine restaurants, browsing old bookstores, and retracing Gertrude Stein’s daily dogwalk (with a poodle named Basket) through the Jardin du Luxembourg. Their nights will rival the revelries of Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. Somehow, Gordon will find the time to get a lot of writing done. His every new novel will be a bestseller in Europe and Francesca will be feted as a great beauty, a muse for paintings and sculptures that are acquired by the Louvre. Everything will be perfect and they’ll love each other always and inspire each other forever and their union will last until the final heat-exhausted star collapses inwardly upon itself in the heavens....

But then Gordon remembers that he doesn’t have a passport, or any real money to speak of. He doesn’t even have much in the way of pubic hair.

Sometimes being thirteen really sucks.

They kiss again, standing in front of the tent, but it’s not quite as magical this time around. They’re both shivering so hard that their teeth are chattering.

“I’m f-fucking f-f-freezing!” Gordon stammers.

"Me, too!" Francesca says, bouncing up and down and rubbing her arms for warmth. "We need to get out of these wet clothes and dry off. Are there any towels in your tent?"

"Um, yeah. You wanna come in?"

"*Uh-huh.*" She gives Gordon a quick kiss on the cheek, then crawls through the tent flap with a wag of Yosemite Sam's soggy beard.

It's dark inside, but there's enough illumination from the moonlight shining through the canvas tent fabric to see what's going on. By the time Gordon gets through the flap, Francesca has already shed her leopard skin bikini top and is about to wriggle out of her cut-offs. "Don't look," she says demurely, but Gordon can't help himself. He doesn't even pretend to look anywhere else.

Free of her clothes (*amazing breasts, big nipples, a dark thatch of pubic hair, my god!*), Francesca unzips Gordon's sleeping bag and snuggles down inside it. She finds a battery-powered Coleman lantern and shines its bright beam on the bulging zipper of Gordon's shorts.

"That's quite the little pup-tent you've got going there, Gordon. Aren't you going to get undressed?"

"I'm not so cold now," Gordon says. There's no way he's letting Francesca see his practically hairless crotch.

"You're still shivering. C'mon, I'll warm you up." She opens the sleeping bag and pats the spot right next to her.

"Turn out the light."

"You're so modest!"

The lantern goes off. In the few seconds that it takes for their eyes to readjust to the darkness, Gordon peels out of his clothes and jumps into the sleeping bag. Francesca squeals: "God, you're so cold! Don't touch me until your hands warm up!"

Shivering anew in earnest, Gordon says through his chattering teeth: "Your feet are like icicles!"

"Okay, wait. I've got something that'll warm us both up." Francesca turns on the lantern and rummages around in her discarded cut-offs. She comes up with her Yosemite Sam lighter and a screw-top aluminum canister the size of a shot glass. She unscrews the lid and shakes out a joint. "Whew! Still dry.... Here—try this."

She lights the joint, takes a tiny toke, and passes it to Gordon. “What is it?” he asks. Before he gets an answer, he takes an enormous crackling hit and holds it deep inside his lungs—doing his best to impress, as usual.

“Careful with that! It’s opiated Thai stick!”

“*Hmmm?*” A whiff of funky-smelling smoke uncoils from Gordon’s left nostril. Whatever he just inhaled, it’s too late.

“Oh my god, you’re gonna be so fucked-up! Let’s not waste it. Blow the smoke into my mouth.” Francesca pinches out the joint and parts her lips as if for a kiss. Gordon puts his lips close to hers and blows a thick plume of smoke straight down her throat. Then she leans in and kisses him for real—long and wet.

Holy shit!

Gordon has never been so turned on by anyone (or anything) in all his life. Even his amorous attachment to the vacuum cleaner machine at the Pink Elephant Car Wash pales in comparison. An actual live nude beautiful girl is kissing him and letting him fondle her tits. It’s unprecedented!

His hand moves to the baby-smooth curve of Francesca’s thigh as they continue kissing. While Gordon caresses her, infinitesimally tiny silken hairs seem to rise up from Francesca’s skin, expanding with radiant energy. As his hand travels along her belly, he grazes her vagina, which seems to have a life of its own. It’s wriggling about like the neck of a clam—then it latches onto Gordon’s hand like remora eel. Suddenly, the whole tent shudders as Francesca’s fingers wrap around his boner. She yanks on him a little roughly, like she’s trying to start an old lawnmower. And then Gordon’s pelvis is jerking and he’s spurting watery semen like the Tin Woodsman’s oil can squeezed by the sweet hands of Dorothy and he finds himself being sucked into the whirling hurricane vortex of *one completely massive headrush!* In his mind, he sees the green-faced Wicked Witch of the West cackling: “*Something with a little poison in it, but sweet to the smell. Poppies! Poppies!...*” A tremor of piss-warm terror jolts through him as his stomach seems to implode.

Then everything tilts to one side and Gordon’s face falls off. Or maybe it’s only vomit—but whatever it is, it definitely looks like him. It lays collapsed on the pillow next to Francesca’s hair like an abandoned

Halloween mask, staring up at him with accusing hollow eyes, the discard of some self-righteous child who wanted to be a werewolf. Francesca is looking at it with a kind of squinty, mute horror.

Gordon knows he should apologize—but maybe that won't be enough. What he should *really* do is provide this girl that he loves with an accounting of his life, a tale of who he is and how he got that way, a confession of his sins and inadequacies. But all that seems much too difficult to explain right now. It's so much easier just passing out.



In a dream, Gordon finds himself revisiting the sun-blasted Texaco station on the outskirts of Parlier. He sees a chocolate brown Doberman pinscher guzzling aqueous pink gasoline from a pump nozzle held by Francesca. When the dog drinks its fill, Gordon squats beside it and lovingly attaches a leather aviator's cap and tinted wind goggles to its angular brown head. The Doberman licks Gordon's face, grateful for the attention—or maybe just looking for food crumbs.

Jimmy stands in the middle of a two-lane country road. He's dressed as a cheerleader, shaking his pom-poms and fake tits while jumping up and down in slow motion. The Doberman assumes a pointer's stance in front of him. Francesca flicks her Yosemite Sam lighter under its stumpy twitching tail. A jet of blue flame leaps out of the dog's butt.

Disembodied now, Gordon watches from a distance, through heat waves, as the Doberman races along the blacktop with forty-foot flames rocketing from its rump. It's like watching an old documentary of a dragster attempting a new land speed record at the Bonneville Salt Flats. Grape vineyards burst into fire in the dog's wake. Gordon rises to consciousness thinking, *Where's Smokey the Bear when you really need him?* Then he hears Smokey saying in his big bear's voice: "Only *you* can prevent forest fires."

Oh, really?



Alone in his sleeping bag, Gordon fitfully rises from sleep to the smell of stale vomit. His own, unfortunately. Most of it seems to have collected in his hair. When he rolls over looking for water and a flashlight, he sees the other sleeping bag across the tent wriggling with some terrible purpose. The light is dim, but it's obvious enough: Jimmy and Francesca are rolling around inside there, screwing like porn stars. A low, guttering moan escapes from behind Francesca's clenched teeth, as if she's having an orgasm. Gordon's stomach flops, but there's nothing left in there for him to throw up.

To hell with Paris, is what he thinks.

And to hell with Jimmy, too... that lucky bastard. But Gordon has to concede that if the circumstances had been reversed, he might have done the same thing. An actual live nude beautiful girl can cloud a guy's judgement, make him betray a good friend, or even commit treason. Just ask Mata Hari—or any smug suburban mom. An actual live nude beautiful girl can pretty much make a guy do anything.



There are some things you just can't do on the Other Side. Getting stoned on opiated Thai stick and having a premature ejaculation during the ensuing headrush is one of them. Like I've said before, there's nothing like an earthly orgasm over there. Which is too bad, because if there was, maybe I could stop reincarnating. Sometimes I think the material universe is like some monstrously addictive drug. You know it's bad for you, but you keep going back for more, anyway. Maybe that's why life on Earth has to be so harsh—so our souls don't end up loving it too much.

"Life'll kill ya," as the great Warren Zevon once sang. There's an infinite number of ways in which life can screw you over: asthma or alcoholism, bankruptcy or bulimia, cancer or car crashes, drug addiction or divorce.... Just go through the alphabet—you'll never run out of possibilities. Even someone as blameless as a little old church lady will wind up getting the shaft in this world. It doesn't matter if she was too timid to sin. She'll still have to deal with psoriasis, bad dentures, failing eyesight, her daughter's lupus, her favorite nephew's schizophrenia, and a thousand other bullshit problems until her lungs gradually fill up with fluid and she suffocates

because her heart is too tired to pump. And who wants to grow up to be a little old church lady, anyway? Where's the fun in that?

Look, we all know that partying with the Hells Angels and jumping off a 90-foot cliff will lead to a skull-crushing hangover the next morning, if not something worse—but some of us are dumb enough (or ballsy enough) to try it, anyway. Maybe that's an okay thing. I'm not saying you should start shooting smack and robbing banks with a posse of depraved French circus clowns (you can watch the movie to see how that one plays out). I'm just saying that a little worldly experience isn't always such a bad thing. It can be good for the soul. For starters, it can make you more compassionate, less willing to judge.

Think about it. If someone had the authority to send your soul to hell, who would you want judging you—the blameless little old church lady, or someone like Mal's hero, James Bond? Let's get even more specific. Let's say Gordon's soul is on the line and while he was in the tent with Francesca, 007 and the church lady were watching him from on high.

Of course, the church lady is going to be seeing sin all over the place (especially clinging to Francesca's hand). She sourly notes profanity, drug use, and premarital sex. Following the handy guide to eternal damnation in the back of her Bible, she decides she has no choice but to consign Gordon's soul to the fiery pit. Thanks to the church lady, Gordon now gets to spend eternity bending over for Tabasco sauce enemas and being force-fed chocolate napalm pudding—all just because he fell in love with a girl and wanted to do the horizontal hula with her.

But then James Bond weighs in.... Here's a true man of the world, a martini-swilling, Walther PPK-packing sybarite, a debonair badass who knows his way around bikini-clad women and the baccarat tables of Monaco. What he sees isn't sin. It's just angsty, adolescent error. "We can fix that up, old chap," Bond says, clapping Gordon on the back. Rather than damn him to hell, Bond persuades M to supply Gordon with a box of bulletproof condoms and then sends him off to practice his mattress mambo technique with the Goldfinger Girls and Pussy Galore.

If James Bond can forgive you, then God should be able to forgive you, too. At least that's my theory. There's no hell after you die, anyway, so it's not like it matters much. There's some pretty heavy mind-fucking that goes on in that Bardo place Gordon's always talking about, but no hell. Hell is right here on Earth, if it's anywhere. I'll bet you're glad to hear that.

Fear and pain don't exist on the Other Side, either, just so you know. You won't find orgies, bullets, narcotics, flesh-eating zombies, or Carlsberg Elephant Malt Liquor on the Other Side—which probably explains why teenage boys find all those things so fascinating. One of the reasons we reincarnate is so we can experience all the stuff that doesn't exist in heaven. The people who enjoy that junk the most are the ones who have most thoroughly forgotten that they're spiritual beings who don't really belong here in the first place. And teenage boys, as everyone knows, are about as oblivious as you can get. For them, the world can look a lot like Valhalla, that mythical hall the Vikings went to when they died in battle, a place of eternal drinking, fighting, and Valkyrie-fucking.

Everyone makes a plan, before they reincarnate, that lays out all the experiences they need to have in their upcoming lifetime. Not all of those experiences are necessarily fun. The more difficulties you put in front of yourself, the more chances you'll have for spiritual growth. There are opportunities for spiritual growth on the Other Side as well, but they're nowhere near as intense as the crap that happens on Earth. The cruel pressures you feel while you're stuck in a human body are the spiritual equivalent of those chthonic geological forces that can turn a pile of dinosaur bones into a diamond. I'm guessing a similar result is intended for our souls. It must be God's way of squeezing out our Divine Sparks.

A daimon, or some more run-of-the-mill spirit guide, will help you with all the details in the blueprint for your new life. Then they'll watch out for you from the Other Side while you're incarnated, trying to make sure that all the stuff you laid out for yourself actually happens. Before you go, you'll make deals with other spirits—like Gordon and I did—to determine who will join you as a brother or a sister, who will be your mom and dad, and so on. You'll even pick out some of your more important friends and enemies—usually spirits you've known from one or more past lives. Your worst enemy in this world could be one of your closest friends on the Other Side. Like, I know for a fact that Jesus and Judas are good buddies. You can't blame Judas for the crucifixion. The whole thing was set up way in advance.

As you've probably guessed by now, Gordon and Jimmy have a relationship like that.



BOOK TWO

*Teenage
Wasteland*

*IF THERE IS A UNIVERSAL MIND, MUST IT BE SANE?
—DAMON KNIGHT*



GO VIKINGS!

P*ep.* It's an obnoxious word. Gordon associates it with fidgety, insincere beauty queens and junior *aides-de-camp* for sleazebag Republican congressmen. Pep is uncool. There's no way Gordon wants to see his own pep rallied, or anyone else's, but that's exactly what he's had to witness every Friday for the past three years during high school football season. Pep rallies are mandatory. Last year, the Kingsburg Vikings won the state championship in their varsity football division, going undefeated against much larger and better-funded schools. It's because they had pep, according to their school principal—that moralizing, Reagan-loving hypocrite, Mr. Donald Witzkowski.

The odious Mr. Witzkowski has dogged Gordon ever since junior high, climbing the administrative career ladder in tandem with Gordon's ascent through the academic ranks. There was just no stopping the guy. Shrugging off the label of Sanctimonious Fishman, Witzkowski rose from his lowly post as assistant vice-principal at Roosevelt Junior High to the far more exalted position of vice-principal at Kingsburg Joint Union High School in the same year that Gordon started classes there as a freshman. Then the school board—in what must have been a fit of collective madness—made Witzkowski the high school principal two years later when Gordon became an upperclassman.

With every liberty that Mr. Witzkowski robs from his students, with every new draconian rule he chooses to impose, the PTA just loves him more—thus proving Erich Fromm's thesis that most people secretly wish to escape from personal freedom. What particularly sucks about the situation is that Mr. Witzkowski has it in for Gordon—and

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with good reason. Gordon's interest in journalism has continued unabated (he's now editor-in-chief of the high school version of *The Viking Voice*) and over the years he's written numerous editorials criticizing Mr. Witzkowski's authoritarian policies. Gordon thinks of their rivalry as friendly and fun, but Mr. Witzkowski acts as if they're deadly foes. As a result, Gordon holds a new high school record. No other straight-A student in Kingsburg's history has racked up more hours in detention.

Pranks have recently become part of Gordon's arsenal in his escalating campaign against the humorless administrator. He and Jimmy stayed up past midnight devising the latest one. They assembled the materials up in the framing room at the lumberyard after closing hours. Later, under cover of darkness, Hideo "Hideous" Nakamatsu met them out in front with his jacked-up, jade green Dodge Ramcharger. Skip Sorenson and Doug the Hermaphrodite were in the cab with him. Gordon and Jimmy stowed their gear and deployed bungee cords to secure a 32-foot extension ladder in the pick-up's bed. Then the five of them cruised through the silent streets of Kingsburg, on high alert for the local cops. No one saw them as they pulled up next to the high school gymnasium and unloaded the truck. They all felt like ninjas as they executed the plan. As far as Gordon could tell, it was flawless.

Now the prank is in place. It only remains for Jimmy to set it in motion at the designated hour. Gordon would have liked to pull the cord himself, but ever since his diagnosis as a narcoleptic three years ago, he's tried to avoid certain emotionally stressful situations—especially ones in which he might need to run.

So instead, he walks into the gymnasium for the usual Friday afternoon pep rally. But this one's going to be different. October 29th, 1982, is a day that will live in infamy—at least for Mr. Witzkowski. Provided everything goes right.



Sitting high up in the gym's bleachers, Gordon, Skip Sorenson, Hideous, and Doug the Hermaphrodite are feeling famous to each

other, giddy with excitement over what's about to transpire. They're all misfits in their various ways, but as a group they have a kind of anti-glamour. Outcast freshman and sophomore boys sometimes look up to them, speaking of them as the Cool Nerds Club.

Skip Sorenson is the only conventionally handsome one in the bunch. He has the jutting chin, broad shoulders, and well-defined musculature of a superhero. The others feel more manly and desirable in his presence, as if Skip's physical glory somehow lends strength to his friends as well. Skip is something of a legend at Kingsburg High. He was the star running back on the varsity football team, and seemed poised to set a new high school record for total yards rushing, until he took his first hit of acid.

It happened at a keg party on the banks of the Kings River last year, after Skip had scored the winning touchdown in a play-off game against Exeter. Skip didn't think the LSD was having much of an effect on him until he realized he was hungry—starving, actually—and it occurred to him that a tuna sandwich would be very tasty right at that moment. Suddenly, a ferocious humming filled the night sky. Skip looked up and saw the Bumble Bee Tuna bee bouncing and buzzing through the air above the other partygoers' heads. It had a wingspan of about thirty feet and one humongous stinger. In a friendly insectile voice, it started singing the Bumble Bee Tuna jingle:

*Yum-Yum Bumble Bee
Bumble Bee Tuna.
I love Bumble Bee
Bumble Bee Tuna....*

Everyone else ignored the giant bee, but Skip was excited to be meeting such a well-known celebrity spokesinsect. As the evening progressed, many more of Skip's favorite characters from television ads and cereal boxes showed up in person, including Cap'n Crunch, Count Chocula, Rocky and Bullwinkle, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and the Ty-D-Bol Man (paddling his tiny rowboat through the foamy waves in Skip's plastic beer cup). Skip had delightful conversations with all of them. He even got a few autographs. When he came down from his high two days later, he quit the football team and swore off all

other sports. Skip's only remaining ambitions were to take more hallucinogens and learn how to pinstripe cars.

Gordon hasn't been able to buy that Corvette he wanted back when he first hit puberty, so he won't be sending much business Skip's way. Narcoleptics aren't allowed to drive. He did, however, get the growth spurt he was hoping for. Gordon is now almost six-foot-two, but he weighs only 133 pounds. He finds his own skinniness distressing. He often has a jittery, haunted look on his face. His blonde hair has grown long and unruly, down past his shoulders. Errant strands of it are always falling into his face (he's stopped using hairspray). He looks like a rock star or an underfed 18th-century poet. He might even be mistaken for a heroin addict, although he's shunned all drugs since his experience at Dinkey Creek—despite Skip's entreaties to see the pretty colors and meet Chef-Boy-R-Dee. These days, the only substance Gordon abuses is beer, which he drinks to excess. Everyone calls him Crash, for reasons he'd rather not dwell on.

Skininess is a trait shared by Doug the Hermaphrodite, whose life-defining moment occurred four years earlier while he was attempting to install a CB radio antenna above his bedroom and fell off the roof. Upon hitting the ground, a four-foot section of the fiberglass antenna broke off and pierced Doug's scrotum, erupting through the tip of his penis. The pain was akin to what General Custer must have felt on his last day of battle, only with more humiliation. No one knows whether his dick still functions; D.H., as he's usually called, chooses to let that remain a mystery. What's clear is that the accident left him weirdly effeminate. He has a high voice, porcelain skin, and limpid blue eyes that always seem on the verge of tears. There's speculation that the antenna severed D.H.'s gonads before they could deliver their adolescence-inspiring jolt of testosterone. He certainly looks like a possible castrato, mooning about town with his fine chestnut hair curling up like a baby girl's ringlets around his perpetually slackened face. He likes to wear hats, a Sherlock Holmes-style deerstalker cap in particular.

No one would ever guess by looking at him that D.H. is extraordinarily intelligent (and perhaps he isn't), but he knows more about music than just about anyone. His special area of expertise is obscure Bob Dylan covers by foreign bands. He got started on that

course at the age of eight when he heard someone's drunken mangling of "Like a Rolling Stone" in Italian ("*Come Una Pietra Scalciata*") at a mafia wedding reception in Sicily (long story...). Bob Dylan is an enlightened prophet sent down to Earth to put a steadying hand on the tillers of our souls, according to D.H. And you haven't heard the angels sing until you've heard "Visions of Johanna" sung in Japanese.

Hideo "Hideous" Nakamatsu thinks Bob Dylan sucks. He's into punk rock. His parents own a thriving kiwi orchard just outside of town and even though they moved from Kyoto only three years ago and still speak Japanese around the house, Hideous—their only son—has already been assimilated into American culture. He went through a shit-kicking Lynyrd Skynyrd phase (straw cowboy hat, pearl-buttoned shirts, armadillo boots). Then he discovered The Ramones, The Dead Kennedys, and a band out of Los Angeles called X. In short order, Hideous bleached his black hair half-blonde and cut it into spikes, he started wearing a dog collar, and he exchanged his cowboy clothes for slashed black jeans, Doc Martens, and a leather motorcycle jacket.

Hideous also took out a loan from his parents so he could buy his jade green Dodge Ramcharger. He turned out to be a preternaturally skilled driver. It's almost uncanny how he can thread the Ramcharger through traffic at twice the legal speed limit. But aside from breaking traffic rules, Hideous is a law-abiding citizen. He takes kung fu classes after school three times a week. He doesn't drink, or do drugs, or even talk all that much (his English still isn't great). Privately, he thinks he must be boring, but Crash, Skip, D.H., and James all seem to like having him around, anyway. Hideous repays their friendship by driving them wherever they want to go, which usually means taking them as a group to see schlocky drive-in movies in Fresno. His all-time favorite drive-in movie is *Death Race 2000*, in which Sylvester Stallone portrays a race car driver who deliberately runs over children, dogs, and little old ladies. Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* runs a close second, although Hideous believes it could have been vastly improved with a punk rock soundtrack.

His latest punk accouterment is a nose ring with three tiny silver balls threaded along the bottom of its loop. It makes him look fierce—or ridiculous, he's still not sure which. Hideous just had his septum pierced two weeks ago. Because the ring is so new, he tends to flick at

it obsessively whenever he gets excited or nervous—as he is now, watching the gym fill up with over 400 students. He wonders if their prank is going to get them arrested.

The cheerleaders in their alluring green-and-gold uniforms shake their pom-poms and do a warm-up cheer as everyone finds their seats:

“Two, four, six, eight! Who do we appreciate?”

“Joyce Carol Oates!” Gordon stands up and shouts.

“Mahatma Gandhi!” D.H. yelps, standing with him.

“Tricky Dick Nixon!” Skip shouts from a sitting position.

“Jerwo Biafab!” Hideous yells last and somewhat lamely. Jello Biafra is the lead singer of The Dead Kennedys, but Hideous sometimes has trouble pronouncing his L’s and R’s. He goes back to flicking at his nose ring again. He doesn’t realize until it’s too late that everyone in his immediate vicinity is staring at him as if he’s pulling long boogers from the depths of his nostrils.

“What happens if you get a cold, Hideous?” Skip asks him without irony.

“Yeah,” says D.H., sitting back down, “doesn’t the snot, like, get all balled up behind that thing?”

“I take out,” Hideous tells them. “Piercing is so awesome! I do scotum next.”

Skip and D.H. both grab their own crotches, aghast. “Oh, dude!” they exclaim. D.H., in particular, knows of what he speaks when he says: “That’s just sick and wrong!”

“It’s perverted,” Skip agrees.

“Plus, it’ll hurt like hell.”

“Pain not so bad, I think,” says Hideous, staring between his legs.

“Dude—” says D.H. “—if you’re so into this whole punk rock Modern Primitive shit, why don’t you just go full-out and bore a hole through your skull?”

“Why the hell should he bore a hole through his skull, D.H.?” Gordon asks, appointing himself as Hideous’ defender.

“Because these holy monk dudes up in the Himalayas have been doing it for centuries. It’s called triptophantasia—”

“Trephination,” Gordon corrects him.

“Whatever.... Supposedly the hole lets out some of your cerebrospinal fluid, so more blood goes to your brain and you feel totally high and groovy all the time. Plus, it opens up your third eye, which makes you more sensitive to electromagnetic vibrations, so you can see auras and shit.”

“You make up. Tell Hideous lie,” says Hideous.

“I’m totally telling the truth, I swear!” D.H. lifts his eyebrows to reveal his blue-eyed innocence. “I saw this show about it on PBS. It’s been going on forever. They even found these old caveman skulls in Africa with holes drilled in their foreheads.”

“Waitta second, man!” Skip cuts in. “I think I saw that show! Wasn’t that the one where those Canadian research guys had the electromagnetic motorcycle helmet? And when they strapped it on their mailman, he hallucinated that he got abducted by aliens!”

“You’re talking about Michael Persinger’s experiments,” Gordon informs Skip.

“Dude, that was it!” D.H. claps his hands in recognition.

“Man, the poor guy thought they probed all his orifices and everything!”

“You guys foo-ah shit,” says Hideous, unconvinced.

“Dude, we are so *not* full of shit,” D.H. says. “This show explained everything. Check this out... there’s a part of our brains that hallucinates a classic alien abduction scenario whenever it’s exposed to intense electromagnetic waves—which can happen around geological fault lines and places like that. Mostly our skulls keep us protected from normal electromagnetic shit, but then there are these sort of sky creatures—”

“Orgone monsters,” Skip fills in.

“—that live at the upper end of the electromagnetic scale.”

“So they’re invisible,” Skip says, taking over. “But they look like giant amoebas when you take pictures of ‘em with infrared film. They live up in the sky like fishes in the ocean, but sometimes they get sick and heat up—and then guess what happens?”

“What?” Hideous asks. Gordon doesn’t know the answer to that one, either.

“They look just like UFOs!” Skip and D.H. both say at once.

"You're right, Hideous," Gordon says. "This is total bullshit." But he can't keep himself from smiling. He's glad to have such oddball friends. They make him feel less odd in comparison.

"Dude, don't you see how it's all connected?" D.H. says, grabbing Gordon's wrist. "Some guy is out walking around and suddenly he bumps into an orgone monster. The electromagnetic waves are so intense that he hallucinates he's being abducted by aliens. But the orgone monster gets kind of freaked out by the experience, too—and it goes a little nuts. That explains all the crop circles and cattle mutilations."

"Also," adds Skip, "sometimes a guy will accidentally breathe in a baby orgone monster—and that's what causes spontaneous human combustion."

"How high were you guys when you watched this PBS show?" Gordon asks them.

"Very high."

"Extremely."

"I not soopwized," says Hideous, flicking his nose ring at them.

"God dang it, Hideous, that doesn't matter!" D.H. says. "You have to bore a hole in your skull so you can see the orgone monsters and tell us what they're up to!"

Everyone looks down toward the cheerleaders when they hear a happy voice shouting up at them: "Hey, guys! *¿Como esta?*" A tiny, misshapen Mexican girl waves to them from the foot of the bleachers. She's Isabelle "Twinkler" Ramirez, the only regularly included female member of their group. Twinkler is wearing a shiny margarita green spandex dress with raspberry pleats that looks like a candy wrapper covering a melted piece of milk chocolate. She's suffered from scoliosis since early childhood. Her spine is curved like a pretzel, making her left leg eight inches shorter than the right one. Even though she has to walk with a cane and her doctors have told her she can expect to die early, she's almost always incredibly upbeat.

"Twinkler!" the guys shout.

With her rubbery-lipped grin and her big, brown sloe eyes, Twinkler is a strange kind of beautiful. She tries to act just like one of the guys when she hangs out with them—drinking too much, telling

dirty jokes, occasionally vomiting over the tailgate of Hideous' pick-up—but all the guys secretly have crushes on her. Skip gallantly climbs down from the bleachers to fetch her. He cradles Twinker against his muscular chest and carries her up the steps as she kicks and squeals with laughter. When they arrive at the top, one of Twinker's white canvas tennis shoes (the heavier one with the eight-inch platform heel) accidentally kicks D.H.'s left ear.

"Ow!" whines D.H., faking a concussion. He's the one responsible for Isabelle's nickname. For a while in her early teens, she was addicted to snorting speed and eating Twinkies. D.H., in a pioneering attempt at flirtation, compared her at that time to a Mexican Twinker Bird (his stoned amalgamation of "Twinkies," the Looney Tunes character "Tweety Bird," and his favorite slang word for a speed addict: "Tweaker"). "Twinker" has stuck with her ever since.

"Omigod! I'm so sorry, D.H.!" Twinker says as Skip sets her down. "Although you probably deserved it."

"Me? I'm completely innocent. If I deserve to have my skull kicked in, then it sure as heck won't hurt Hideous to have a hole bored through his."

"Man, just give it up..." Gordon says.

"He's already got the nose ring. He's halfway there," D.H. persists.

"Fock you! Maybe I put ho in *you* skoww!" Hideous says with just a touch too much vehemence.

"Hideous! Down, boy..." commands Skip.

Hideous, in his studded dog collar, bares his teeth and growls.

Twinker looks concerned. "What are you guys trying to do, make Hideous have a lobotomy?"

"Nothing so gruesome. We just want him to watch the orgone monsters for us."

"Are you high?"

"I wish," D.H. answers, rubbing his ear.

The cheerleaders get everyone to stop talking by starting off the pep rally with a foot-stomping routine. They sing to the crowd and clap their gloved hands; in response, 400 pairs of feet stomp back at them, raising a huge din in the cavernous gymnasium. It sounds like a battalion of Hitler Youth marching at Nuremberg:

We are Vikings! (stomp, stomp, stomp...)
Mighty Vikings! (stomp, stomp, stomp...)
No one beats us! (stomp, stomp, stomp...)
Or defeats us! (stomp, stomp, stomp...)

And so on.... Gordon thinks there should be something in there about Valhalla and the promise of eternal carousing with perky-breasted Valkyries if the team should lose to Selma that night, but of course there isn't anything like that. When the routine ends, the cheerleaders flip up their skirts and do the splits. As the students in the bleachers clap and cheer, Mr. Witzkowski bounds out into the center of the gym as if the applause is for him.

He's dressed like a football coach—the *big dork*—wearing a pair of too-tight running shorts and a Vikings locker room T-shirt. There's even a shiny nickel-plated whistle on a braided lanyard around his neck. Mr. Witzkowski grabs the microphone off its stand and unhooks it so he can rove the planks of the gym's polished hardwood floor as he gives his pep talk. His green-and-gold tube socks are pulled up almost to his thighs.

"He's so gay," Skip says. "I mean, look at him. C'mon!"

Twinker leans over and whispers in Gordon's ear, "I hate him so much!"

Because Twinker is unable to attend PE classes, she has to spend that time instead doing clerical work in the school's administration office. Over the past few months she's found out some things about Mr. Witzkowski that even Gordon didn't know, until she told him recently. At Gordon's suggestion, Twinker taped some of Mr. Witzkowski's phone conversations, and now they're using an excerpt from those tapes in the prank they're about to put into motion. Gordon hopes Jimmy is ready.

"The Kingsburg Vikings were the undefeated state champions in their division last year," Mr. Witzkowski shouts into the microphone, to thunderous cheers. "And they're still undefeated this year!" More cheers. Someone even lets loose a burst off an airhorn. "We've got the Number One greatest football team the San Joaquin Valley has ever seen! And I don't think it's just because of all the free raisins our team gets to eat, although I'll bet that helps some."

Sunny Maid Raisins is one of the proud sponsors of team sports at Kingsburg High. Thanks to a deal that Witzkowski worked out with them, the school mascot is now a plump dancing raisin wearing a blonde wig and a horned Viking helmet. Immediately after this mascot's debut, a new slur for the Vikings was invented at rival schools. They're now known as "The Fighting Devil Turds."

Get to the point, Witz, you corporate pimp, thinks Gordon.

"But if you ask me, what we really have going for us," Mr. Witzkowski is saying, bouncing around in his ridiculous high-top tennis shoes, "what makes us special, is team spirit. That's right! *Team spirit!* It doesn't matter how many laps Coach Eskesen makes his ballplayers run, or how many push-ups they do. Well, I take that back.... It matters. I mean, they've put in the hard work. They've made some tough sacrifices. But no matter how good they are—and these boys are the best, believe you me—they wouldn't be winning games like they do if every student at Kingsburg High wasn't standing behind them one hundred percent. *I mean it!* You're the reason for our victories, each and every one of you. You might think you're above it all. You might be saying to yourself, 'I'm too cool for this, man...'" Witzkowski grimaces and pretends for a moment to be a dissatisfied beatnik. "*This just ain't my scene, man...?*" It's like watching Jerry Lewis play the role of a noble Jewish doctor enduring torture in a Nazi death camp—such a hubristic performance against type that it's flat-out creepy.

"Well, listen up, people! *No one* is too cool for team spirit." Mr. Witzkowski is gearing up for his big finish. "In fact, if you *don't* have team spirit, I'd say that borders on treason. It's anti-Kingsburg! It's even un-American! What I'm saying, basically, is: *If you're not with us, you're against us!*' And what I need to hear from you right now is: *Are you with us?*"

There's a fair amount of cheering and some shouts of "Yes!" Mr. Witzkowski cups a hand to his ear and shouts: "*I can't hear you!*"

More cheers and shouts. The airhorn blows again. Several sophomores raise a butcher paper banner that reads: **Vikings are BODACIOUS!** Mr. Witzkowski takes his cue from the banner and taunts his audience by shouting: "That's not nearly *bodacious* enough for me, boys and girls!"

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The cheers from the bleachers recede like a wave smothering itself into foam on a sandy beach. A few catcalls creep in. The guy is just so uncool—it's obvious even to the sophomores....

At that moment, the loping guitar and drums from the opening of Pink Floyd's "Run Like Hell" resounds through the gym. Everyone looks up. A big battery-powered Peavey guitar amp, cranked all the way up, is mounted in the high window above the basketball scoreboard. The guts from Jimmy's old Heath Kit Quadraphonic Stereo is running a three-minute answering machine tape on an endless loop through the speakers. And here comes Mr. Witzkowski's voice now, dubbed on top of the Pink Floyd track (which fades into the background). It's from a phone call to an old college friend that he made from his office a few weeks ago:

"God, I'm so sick of these deluded little creeps! All they've got is a halfway decent ball team, but they act like they're all growing up to be astronauts and movie stars—when the truth is, they're all just a bunch of dumb clodhoppers. Their education stinks and they'll be lucky if they can make it through community college. Most of them'll wind up driving tractors or boxing raisins for a living. But they're too dense to see that. Jesus, they give me so much grief! Like I'm the big loser somehow.... I swear, Henry, I've just about had it with this hick town. I'm ready to move someplace more sophisticated, like Bakersfield."

There's a kind of stunned silence in the gymnasium as everyone listens to Mr. Witzkowski's rant. At the end of it, the Pink Floyd track comes back up full blast and the whole thing starts over again. Witzkowski just stands there staring up at the amp like a mouth-breathing zombie until he remembers there's a microphone in his hand. Trying to drown out his recorded words, he shouts: "Don't listen to that! It was taken out of context! *Janitor!* Where's the janitor? We need a ladder in here... *right now!*" Students are starting to laugh.

Jimmy has been outside the gym the whole time, hiding in the bushes below the high window. He's the one who started the tape with a crude remote control transmitter. Hearing Witzkowski's scream is his cue to deliver the *coup de grace*. He tugs on a long cord disappearing over the windowsill and hightails it out of there. Inside the gym, an

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enormous hand-painted banner made of sewn-together bed sheets unfurls down the front of the scoreboard. It reads:



The gymnasium explodes with shouts and laughter. Mr. Witzkowski has no way of stopping it. It's out of control. Red-faced, clenching his fists, he threatens to suspend everyone in the gym, but that just makes them all laugh harder. Witzkowski's contempt for his students is out in the open now, his hypocrisy exposed for all time. Gordon, Skip, D.H. and Hideous are slapping each other's backs, rejoicing in their victory over tyranny. Twinker gives Gordon a kiss on the cheek that makes him tingle all over, as if he's been sprinkled with fairy dust.

Sometimes it feels really good to confront your enemies.



To celebrate their victory over the evil Mr. Witzkowski, Gordon and his friends elect to skip the football game that they told their parents they would be attending that night. Instead, they all pile under a tarp in back of Hideous' truck (along with a case of beer and a quarter ounce of Mexican red-dirt marijuana) so Hideous can sneak them into Mooney's Drive-In for the price of a single admission.

Mooney's is on the outskirts of Fresno alongside Old Highway 99. As Hideous pulls up to the ticket booth, he sees the decrepit, bug-spattered marquee advertising a triple feature with a Halloween theme: *Blood for Dracula*, *Daughters of Dracula*, and *Hollywood She-Wolves*. An Andy Warhol gross-out, a lesbian vampire movie, and something that sounds like werewolf porn... what could be more perfect?

Once he's inside, Hideous drives fast over the humps in the lot, dodging through speaker poles and jostling his cargo in back to show off his sense of fun. The dips are littered with broken beer bottles, used condoms, and flattened pizza boxes. Mooney's is considered a free-zone for small-time debauchery—especially among the underaged—although police cars occasionally cruise through there. A door-mounted spotlight suddenly flares, interrupting a blowjob in the backseat of the family station wagon just as a climax is being achieved in sync with one of Dario Argento's decapitation scenes. For some, the prospect of getting caught only adds to the thrill.

Blood for Dracula is already underway as Hideous parks the truck with its tailgate facing the drive-in screen. He gets out to unhook the tarp. Jimmy and Skip give him some crap about the rough ride, while

Gordon climbs out and helps Hideous extract several low-slung beach chairs from behind the cab's bench seat. Soon everyone is seated in the pick-up bed, cracking open beers and adjusting blankets on their laps.

Life doesn't get much better than this, is what they're thinking.

Up on the screen, Udo Kier's Count Dracula is complaining that he can only drink the blood of *virgins* (as he pronounces it). Not much later, Udo finds himself sprawled on a white-tiled bathroom floor, vomiting up shocking amounts of bright red non-virgin blood. Dressed in formal eveningwear, he manages to spew with great style, spasming like an auto-asphyxiating aristocrat.

"Puking up blood always looks better when you're wearing a tuxedo," Twinker observes.

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I have a massive bleeding ulcer," D.H. says.

"Shouldn't we be firing up a joint right about now?" asks Skip.

"Hell yeah!" says Jimmy.

Skip places the baggie of marijuana in his lap and gets out a packet of Zig-Zags. "Who sold you this lid, Crash?" he asks. "Paco or Leo?"

"Leo gave it to me for thirty bucks. Paco's waiting on a new shipment."

Even though he doesn't smoke pot himself, Gordon often ends up buying it for his friends. He can almost always score weed off the Mexican guys on the lumberyard crew, usually Paco and Leo, who've worked there for years. Paco offers the more consistent product—tightly packed sativa buds grown on his cousin's ranch down in Mexico (or so he claims). Leo's pot can be more hit-or-miss. Sometimes the highs are staggering, far too intense ("Polio Weed"); other times they're just right—even better than Paco's pot. Every now and then there's a batch of leafy hemp that's just one step up from smoking dried lettuce, but in those few cases Leo has been gracious enough to provide refunds.

"Any idea what this stuff is?" Skip asks Gordon while licking the rolling paper of the first joint and applying a final twist.

"It's supposed to be Mexican Red. Leo swears it's really great."

D.H. says, "I just hope it wasn't sprayed with Paraquat."

The Drug Enforcement Agency under the Reagan administration has been on a tear lately, spending millions of dollars to destroy marijuana crops with Paraquat, a defoliant that's toxic to humans as well as plants. "Doesn't it just piss you off," says Gordon, "that our federal government's use of Paraquat could be poisoning millions of young dope smokers like yourselves?"

"This whole 'War On Drugs' thing is totally screwed up," D.H. says. "Thanks to the new laws, totally harmless small-time druggies are the fastest growing segment of the prison population."

"Maybe the government *likes* it that way," Gordon speculates. "Maybe there's a profit to be made from supplying prisons with fresh blood."

"So then who are the *real* vampires?" Jimmy asks, looking around like a spooked deer. Then he bursts out laughing. Up on the screen, Joe Dallesandro is savagely raping a teenaged virgin—ostensibly to protect her from the dark powers of Dracula.

"The truth is," Gordon concludes, "we all have a lot more to fear from Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority than we do from our friends the marijuana growers."

"Fuck it," says Skip, sticking the joint in his mouth and lighting it. "Let's just get high and not worry so much."

"Damn straight!" Jimmy says as Skip passes him the joint. "Gordon, you should toke up if you're really more afraid of Reagan than you are of pot."

"So how is that stuff?" he asks.

"Not bad," says Skip, exhaling. "Smells a little skunky, but it tickles my lungs the right way."

"Go ahead. Take a hit," Jimmy says, holding the joint under Gordon's nose.

"I don't think so."

"*C'mon!*" everyone says at once, including Hideous, who won't even drink beer, much less smoke pot. *Traitor...*

"This is a classic example of peer pressure," Gordon protests. "You should all be ashamed of yourselves."

"Oh, c'mon, you puss," Jimmy says. "Do it as a big 'Screw You' to Reagan."

"Do it as a large 'Lick My Crusty Bunghole' to Witzkowski," says D.H., who has a more picturesque way with words.

"Do it for me," Twinker says, "and I'll shotgun it for you."

"*Woo-hoooo!*" the other guys howl like maniac coyotes while thumping Gordon on the back.

Twinker takes the joint from Jimmy and inserts the burning end of it into her mouth. She leans in close to Gordon, as if to kiss him, and blows straight through to the joint's wet twisted butt, scribbling the air with smoke. Gordon opens his mouth and Twinker directs the dense frond of smoke right down his throat. His eyes close as he breathes it in. His mouth, accidentally on purpose, grazes Twinker's lips. For a moment, Gordon imagines he and Twinker have been transported to faraway realms together inside a magic bubble of sensuality and kindness. Then Twinker spits the joint into the palm of her hand and picks it up saying, "Wow! That was getting hot!"

"No kidding..." D.H. teases. "Crash looked like he was about ready to stick his tongue down your throat and start mauling your tits."

"D.H., you're such a sad, horny dreamer..." Twinker says, secretly squeezing Gordon's hand, "I'm sure you just imagined that."

"We're *all* a bunch of sad, horny dreamers," acknowledges D.H., "but we hate admitting it."

That statement causes everyone to look up into the moonless sky, as if in silent prayer. Threatening black clouds have obscured all the stars. A gathering thunderstorm has turned the night upside-down. Skip breaks the silence by saying, "I don't know about you guys, but that pot's already climbed right on top of me." Afraid of getting too high, Gordon coughs out a chestful of smoke.

"Pass that little doobie over here," says Jimmy. Twinker hands it to him. Jimmy croaks out a "*Yeah, Mon...*" like a contented Rastafarian, then tokes on the joint as if it's a gigantic spliff. He passes it to D.H., who regards the burning roach with melancholy, then puts it to his lips and inhales like Jean-Paul Belmondo in Godard's *Breathless*.

"Hey, look!" Jimmy croaks at the movie screen. "Lesbians!"

"This is so great! I'm rolling another joint," Skip says with glee.

Blood for Dracula has ended and a new movie is just starting. Two naked women caress each other on top of a large bed in a shadowy

room. One of them is a brunette with ample breasts, full lips, and the dark-eyed allure of a femme fatale. The other is a pretty Scandinavian blonde who looks more girlish and vulnerable. They're kissing each other like they're really getting off on it. But then a shadow appears in the doorway. The two women stand up and scream as a mysterious stranger enters the room firing a gun. Blood spatters their beautiful breasts and they fall on the bed in a heap. Then a horde of vampire bats takes wing in the night sky and a title appears on the screen: *Vampyres*.

"Hey, I thought we were supposed to be seeing *Daughters of Dracula*," D.H. complains.

"With hot girl-on-girl *acción* like that, who cares?"

"You're such a hopeless poon hound, James," Twinker tsk-tsks.

Gordon tries to be philosophical. "I guess one lesbian vampire movie is as good as the next."

"Speaking of vampires..." says Jimmy, "how's your mom these days?"

"Oh man..." Gordon groans, "she's too hateful to even talk about. Did I tell you she's fucking my uncle?"

"Your dad's brother? No way!"

"That's sick!" D.H. exclaims.

"I'll bet it happens a lot more than anyone thinks," says Skip, "although it's definitely perverted."

"I guess it'd be worse if it was her own brother, but still, it's pretty disgusting," says Gordon. "They're acting like they plan to move in together. The other day, I was doing homework in my room and when I went out to use the john, I ran right into him. Ol' Uncle Gerald was just sitting there on the toilet *in my bathroom*, buck-naked. The door was wide open. He was farting up a storm, too."

"Oh, man!"

"That's just not right," Twinker says.

"You know, of course, that while you were standing there smelling your uncle's farts, his actual shit molecules were flying right up your nostrils," D.H. says, taking the scientific view. "Your uncle's vaporized micro-turds are probably still stuck to the alveoli in your lungs even as we speak."

“Great,” says Gordon. “It smelled like a putrid dairy farm in there. Like a bucket of cow manure and three pounds of rotten Gorgonzola had been marinating in his anus for weeks.”

“That’s very descriptive, Crash,” Twinker says, wrinkling her nose. “Thanks for sharing.”

“No problem.”

“So is your mom still being a nudist?” Jimmy wants to know.

“More than ever,” says Gordon. “She joined this club—the American Association of Nude Recreation—so now she goes on field trips where she can be all naked with other people. She’s even got my uncle doing it. That’s why he was bare-assed in my bathroom. He thinks walking around in front of me with his dong hanging out is just A-OK.”

“Poor little lambikins...” Twinker says, patting Gordon’s head. “When you get all growed up, you’ll have some terrible psychological scars to deal with in therapy.”

“Hey, how would you like it if *your* dead dad’s incredibly hairy naked brother started dating your mom?”

“I’ve seen worse,” Twinker says. And everyone believes her.

“Jesus Christ, I’m high!” exclaims Skip. “Are those the same two women who got shot earlier?” He passes around another joint, already burnt halfway down, as everyone’s attention returns to the movie screen.

The blonde and the brunette from the lesbian love scene are now somewhere out in the English countryside wearing long satin dresses and velvet capes. They’re looking quite sexy. The brunette stands by the side of the road trying to hitch a ride, while the blonde watches from a hiding place under a gnarled tree. A little blue car picks up the brunette and drives off with her to a creepy Gothic estate.

“Hey, look! It’s the same mansion they used in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show!*” says D.H., who knows about such things.

“It is!” Hideous seconds him. And then he sings, “*I weemembah... doing the time whoap....*”

“Sing it, Hideous!” Skip encourages him. But Hideous has already sung enough.

The man who offers the brunette a ride is a suave, aristocratic Englishman with a trim waistline, an aquiline nose, and starched French cuffs. He says his name is Ted. Ted looks like he races vintage sports cars for a living or spends most of his time on yachts. The brunette leads him up the steps to the mansion. They pass under the leaded glass roof of an atrium, then step inside through the gargoyle-guarded front doors. Standing in darkness at the foot of a mahogany staircase, the brunette asks: "Does this kind of thing excite you?"

"*Hell yeah*," Jimmy answers for Ted.

Ted and the brunette climb the stairs and she shows him into a lavishly decorated room lit by Tiffany lamps. There's a lot of tropical greenery and a zebra skin rug on the floor. Ted goes over to stand by an ornate marble fireplace flanked by two life-sized Balinese puppets while the brunette goes off to find some wine. He suspiciously eyes a glass shelf that displays two blue Chinese vases and a knife with a handle that appears to have been carved from a fossilized walrus penis bone. When the brunette returns with the wine, Ted asks her a few questions about herself, gets some unsatisfactory answers, and then they start making out. In no time at all, they're in bed together, naked, and Ted is asking, between gulps of wine, "Are you sure we're alone?... I get the strong feeling we're not." To put his troubled mind at ease, the brunette thrusts her spectacular breasts in Ted's face, then turns around and fucks him cowgirl-style.

It's a surprisingly explicit film. "Oh, baby," moans Skip, sneaking glances at Twinker. Jimmy, D.H., and Gordon are doing the same—all of them shifting around uncomfortably beneath their blankets. Only Hideous appears to be unperturbed.

"Yes, Skip, I'm turned on, okay?" Twinker says, catching his furtive stare. "I'd let Ted stick 'is willy up me bum, any day. Those English accents really do it for me."

"You tawdry Mexican slut!" D.H. says, attempting an English accent of his own, which comes out sounding like John Cleese from Monty Python. "You'll have the dons of Oxford rogering you like mongrel dogs if you keep up that sort of talk."

It does the trick. Twinker falls into D.H.'s bony arms with a swoon, gushing, "Oh, yes, D.H., roger me! Yes! *Please*, yes!" Then she

sits up and pats him on the cheek, saying, "Nice try, *amigo*, but we're still in Fresno."

"Damn!" says D.H., slapping his baby-smooth forehead.

After having a powerful orgasm, Ted falls asleep and awakens some hours later when he hears the bedroom door opening with a creak. The brunette is asleep at his side with her eyes wide open, which Ted finds kind of creepy. He tries to get out of bed to shut the door, but he's so spent he can barely sit up. When he wakes up the next morning, the brunette is gone and there's a deep, bloody gash across the inside of his left elbow. Ted wonders how it got there. He finds a knife-like shard from a broken wineglass and bends over to examine its bloody edge, wrinkling his aristocratic chin like a tortoise getting an enema.

"*Man, I must've been really fucked up last night,*" Jimmy says, speaking for Ted again.

"Dude, you were *sooooo* wasted," Skip confirms for Ted. He lights a third joint and passes it to D.H. as a sort of a consolation prize for not getting to hump Twinker. D.H. takes a melancholic hit and says, "I'm starting to feel slightly odd..."

"Me, too," Jimmy admits.

"Hey, is anyone else seeing a big black frame around the movie screen?" Gordon asks. The picture up there is starting to look three-dimensional to him.

"Yeah, I see it, too," Skip says. "Cool!"

"I think I'm gonna be sick..." Twinker moans when D.H. passes the joint to her. "What kind of *loco* weed is this?"

"I think it might be laced with angel dust," D.H. says, starting to sound like HAL from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "I've lost all contact with my body. It's like I'm floating in a tin can with Major Tom."

"Ground contwoh to Maja Tom," Hideous quips, catching the song reference. David Bowie isn't exactly punk rock, but he's out-there enough to be interesting.

As Skip takes the joint back from Twinker, he says, "If this is what angel dust feels like, then I *like* it!"

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

“Whoa. *Dusted!*” Jimmy says the word like the lead singer in a heavy metal band introducing their biggest hit at a sold-out concert. “What d’you think, Gordon?”

“How should I know? I’ve only been high one other time, and that didn’t work out so well.”

“It did for me.”

“Yeah, that was very studly of you—boning the girl I jumped off a cliff for, because I wanted her so bad.”

“If you’d wanted her that bad, I guess you shouldn’t have thrown up on her.”

“Just shut up and watch the movie, dickhead.”

Gordon is still a little sore about what happened with Francesca, even after three years. He still thinks of her as his one and only shot at true love. She just disappeared on the day after the tent episode. That unprincipled slinking dog Jimmy didn’t even try to stay in touch with her. Maybe she was embarrassed by what she’d done.

They watch Ted explore the empty mansion. There’s a stilled grandfather clock in a corner and the mounted head of a jaguar baring its fangs on the far wall near a window. The brunette is nowhere to be found. Ted decides to go outside and get back into his car. As he’s driving away, he sees a trailer parked on the grounds by a small lake. He stops in to ask for a bandage for his arm. A young English couple, camping there overnight, offers Ted coffee and a disinfectant. He thanks them for their hospitality. While he’s getting bandaged up, he asks them for the proper time, complaining that his watch has stopped. The film cuts to a broken watch on a bloody arm being pulled from the wreckage of a little blue car. Is it Ted’s? (No one’s quite sure....) Back at the trailer, as Ted gets up to leave, the young woman asks him, “Does anyone live in that house?” Ted stops in the doorway and replies: “That’s a question I asked myself earlier. And I still haven’t found an answer.”

“I just figured it out,” Gordon says. “Ted’s dead, but he doesn’t know it yet.”

“No way!” scoffs Jimmy and Skip.

“Yeah, look... it makes perfect sense,” D.H. jumps in. “Ted was the homophobic guy who shot the two lesbians at the start of the film.

Then he returned to the scene of the crime, like killers always do. Ten years have gone by, but the souls of the two lesbians are still there, haunting the place—only instead of ghosts, they’ve become vampires. Last night the brunette lesbian sucked Ted’s blood to get revenge. So now Ted’s dead, but the world looks pretty much the same to him—only weirder—because without knowing it he’s turned into a vampire, too.”

“What if that’s all death is?” Gordon speculates. “Just a little shift in perspective. How would we know if it happened to us? Like, what if I died when I jumped off that cliff at Dinkey Creek? How would I know? What if each time you die the world just gets more like a dream, but nothing really changes?”

“That’s so *deep*...” Jimmy says, mocking him.

“Maybe it’s close to the truth,” Twinker says. “But I don’t think we necessarily become vampires. Think about reincarnation. Maybe we get more psychic and soul-wise with each death—more like angels. Maybe that’s how we evolve.”

“Oh *please*, bitch....”

“Obviously, James, you haven’t died even once yet. But you might get the chance if you ever call me bitch again.”

“But I meant bitch in a good way.”

“Just shut up and watch the movie, dickhead.”

Ted has driven back to the mansion and spent the whole day sitting there in his car, waiting for the brunette’s return. She finally shows up after dark, getting out of a car driven by a man named Rupert. The pretty Scandinavian blonde is with them.

It occurs to Gordon that the blonde bears an uncanny resemblance to his own mother in her wedding pictures. Could Cynthia have moonlighted as a lesbian vampire actress in her freewheeling single days? *No, that’s impossible....* The pot must be severely messing with his head to make him even think that.

A few minutes later, an old Native American man walks up to Hideous’ truck carrying a pizza box. He looks like the actor from the “Keep America Beautiful” commercial about pollution—that sensitive Indian chief who cries a single tear after he sees a river full of oil sludge, discarded Clorox bottles, and dead carp. He leans the fringed

sleeves of his deerskin jacket on the edge of the pick-up next to where Gordon is sitting and he says in his whispery old Indian voice: “There was no angel dust in your smoke. That was Diviner Sage—ancient plant-spirit, wisdom teacher of the shamans. You are not your body. There’s a part of you that’s immortal. But you must go deeper into the physical, and be tempered by its onslaughts, before you reach your eternal apotheosis. So now you know.... How ‘bout some pizza?”

The old man opens the pizza box and gives Gordon a mystic slice of pepperoni with extra cheese. He offers slices to D.H. and Twinker, too. Then he pulls his hands across his solar plexus, like opening a curtain, and shows them a mystery. In a burst of brilliant white vaporous light, he disappears.

“That was weird,” says Gordon. His ears are ringing from the shaman’s words.

“That old woman was so nice to give us her pizza,” says Twinker.

“I feel like I just got off the octopus ride at the County Fair,” says D.H., scarfing down his slice, “but *dang* this is good.”

“Hey, where’d you guys get the pizza?” asks Skip.

“I thought an Indian shaman gave it to us, but Twinker says he was an old woman.”

“She was so sweet.”

“Did you save any for us?” Jimmy wants to know.

“We only got three slices,” D.H. says. “They came down from the sky like manna from heaven.”

“At least they weren’t handed to you by an alien,” Skip jokes.

“That, too,” D.H. says, chewing. “I don’t know why I’m so calm about it. He was this tall, bug-eyed guy. Gray skin. Real skinny. But super friendly.”

“Gordon saw an Indian,” Twinker informs everyone, as if they didn’t hear him the first time.

“I’m thinking all three of us might’ve been hallucinating,” Gordon admits.

“Going fucking batshit is more like it,” Jimmy says.

“Yeah,” D.H. says contentedly, “but the pizza’s real.”

“Smells gud,” says Hideous. “I go buy more.” Everyone digs in their pockets for money to finance the pizza trip. While Hideous waits

to collect it, he says, “I saw bright wight, then pizza. I not think only haw-wucination.”

“Thanks for sticking up for us, Hideous,” Gordon says.

“No pwobwum.”

“I think an orgone monster might’ve just passed through here,” Skip theorizes. “Or maybe Mooney’s is sitting on a massive geological fault line and your brains just had an electromagnetic freakout.”

“I think someone here is majorly full of shit,” says Jimmy. “Maybe even more than one person.”

“Let’s just drop it,” Gordon says, not unkindly. The experience feels precious to him—like received wisdom from a vision quest—and he doesn’t want to diminish it by analyzing it to death.

“By the way,” says Skip, “I’ve never been so high in my whole entire life. Except for that one time with acid. Okay, maybe two or three times with acid. And once on mushrooms. But I just wanted you to know that I am so fucking out of it right now...” Skip can’t seem to stop running his mouth off. Twinker reaches over and puts a finger to his lips, shushing him. Skip tenderly kisses her fingertips and she leaves them there, liking it.

While Hideous is away on his errand, everyone’s attention drifts back to the movie. Rupert and the blonde go down the stairs to visit the wine cellar, taking a wax-dripping candelabrum with them to light the way. Meanwhile, Ted and the brunette have retired to the bedroom, where they’re violently making love again. Ted has another monumental orgasm and falls back on the pillows like a spent monster. After he drops into a deep, post-coital sleep, the brunette crawls over his chest and starts licking at the bloody gash in Ted’s arm like a cat lapping up milk. Ted stirs and the brunette lewdly kisses him while he dreams, smearing his mouth with his own blood.

“Holy shit! That’s kinky...” says Jimmy.

“Don’t you think that brunette looks a little like my mom?” Skip asks him.

“Dude, your mom’s even better looking. You have the coolest mom of any of us.”

It’s true. Skip’s mother is a stunning beauty, even in her late-thirties—a sultry brunette hairdresser with a shape that’s almost a

cartoon of the idealized woman. She's also incredibly funny and sweet. Ever since she divorced Skip's dad about six years ago, she's devoted herself to being a stellar single mom. She never goes out with other men, she always has dinner ready at seven unless Skip says he's going to be home late, and she generally takes care of Skip's every need while treating him like her best friend.

How could Skip complain?

"Which do you think is worse?" Skip asks. "Having a mom like Gordon's, who's an ass-chewing shrew and just, in general, a total bitch on wheels? Or having a mom like mine, who smothers you with love?"

"What kind of a question is that?" asks Gordon. "Are you nuts? I'd take your mom, any day."

Up on the screen, the brunette leaves Ted passed out in the bedroom and goes into the hallway, where she finds the blonde in a sort of fugue state, leaning against a moonlit window with blood dripping from the corners of her lips. The brunette grabs the blonde's hands—which are covered in blood—and shakes her awake. The two of them rush into the blonde's bedroom, where Rupert is convulsing and gurgling on top of a mattress with arterial blood spray spattering everywhere. He's been stabbed multiple times.

"See? That's just like something my mom would do," says Gordon, identifying his mother with the blonde perhaps a little too strongly.

The blonde and the brunette leap onto the bed and start licking the blood from Rupert's face and neck. It's obscene. Orgiastic. The blood isn't coming fast enough for them, so the brunette gets the walrus penis bone knife off the dresser and plunges it deep into Rupert's back. His foot kicks at the iron bed railing in his final death spasms. The women slurp up more blood, nipping flesh. Then they drag Rupert's corpse down the stairs and blithely wash all the blood off their naked bodies in a steamy lesbian shower scene.

"See? Brunettes can have fun, too," Skip says, elbowing Gordon. "My mom has plenty—that's for sure." He tries to sound casual when he says: "Would you guys think it was weird if I told you my mom had been hitting on me?"

“That’s definitely weird,” Jimmy says. “But if your mom had been hitting on *me*, I would’ve had to bone her, no question. How’d it go for you?”

“I’m not saying anything happened,” Skip backpedals.

“Well, did she, or didn’t she? Inquiring minds want to know,” D.H. says.

“You don’t have to tell them anything, Skip,” Twinker says, a little out of breath. She looks as if she’s just been punched in the diaphragm.

“Fuck it,” Skip says. “She did, okay? My mom came on to me.”

“How’d it happen?” Gordon asks.

“I got home late from that Monty Python festival we went to around a month ago. Remember? I was kind of wasted.”

“Two cases of beer and a pint of Jack Daniel’s snuck in under our clothes. A new record for indoor movie theaters!” D.H. recalls with pride. “Good thing it was a cold night.”

“My mom was waiting up for me. She knew I’d been drinking, even though I was trying to be cool about it. She must’ve smelled it on me. When she got up from the couch she was wearing this kind of sexy black nightie and I could see her nipples right through it. I’m not saying that was bad or anything.... I mean, I’ve seen her tits before, on accident—but this was different. It was like I was seeing her the way another guy might see her.”

“And she is *fox-yyy!*” Jimmy says, displaying his usual insensitivity.

“She is,” Skip says. It’s just a statement of fact. “Anyway, my mom said, ‘Skip, I’m really disappointed that you’ve been drinking. And I’m even more disappointed that you didn’t take me with you.’ Then she was like, ‘I’ve just been sitting here all alone all night, feeling really bored and horny.’ And that was when I realized she was drunk, too.”

“Oh shit,” says D.H., “what’d you do?”

“Well, the short version is: *I fucked her.*”

“Holy crap! You’re kidding!” D.H. shouts.

“Awesome!” Jimmy cackles.

“Jesus, Skip,” says Gordon. Twinker voices the same words with more concern.

"I fucked my own mom," Skip says, as if he needs to repeat it. "And I'm not proud of it. But man, she was hot!"

"I guess from here on out whenever we say the word 'motherfucker' it'll seem a lot more literal," D.H. says, trying to follow along with Skip's moods.

"So tell us about it..." Jimmy says. "Was her pussy really wet?"

"James, don't be gross!" Twinker slaps the back of his head.

"Ow! Well, was it?"

"Let me put it this way," Skip says. "All the sex I've had before was just with girls. But my mom is a real woman."

"Well, yeah..." Gordon says, "I mean, she gave birth to you, after all. Doesn't it bother you that you're sticking your dick in the same hole that your head once came out of? I mean, I know your mom's a total babe and all, but still..."

"Let me ask you something, Gordon. Have you ever been laid?"

"Does a handjob count?"

"No. How about you, D.H.?"

"My mom's still holdin' out on me. I think she's waiting until I can buy her a Porsche."

"Okay. Ha-ha.... But look, my point is that neither of you guys have the right to be raggin' on me. You can't understand what I'm going through. Sex is a hugely powerful thing. And my mom is really good at it. Some nights I can't wait to get home and rip the clothes off her."

"Whoa!" says Jimmy. "You're still doing it? Like what—every night?"

"Practically."

"Skip, this is not good," Twinker says, her eyes shining with blinked-back tears. "It may feel good to you now, but in the long run it's not gonna be healthy for you. I know! They say that one out of every three girls is sexually abused before they turn eighteen, and for boys it's around one in six. You're being sexually abused, Skip, whether you realize it or not. Your mom should *not* be having sex with you."

"Twinker," Jimmy says, exasperated, "sometimes you can be such a damn prude."

“No, she’s right...” Skip says, suddenly sober. “I’ve been feeling really guilty about it. I guess that’s why I told you guys. I needed to tell *somebody*. And I know we shouldn’t be doing it. I just don’t know how to make it stop.”

“Stop thinking with your dick, for starters,” D.H. suggests helpfully.

“Easy for you to say,” Jimmy sneers. “Do you even have one?”

“Guys! Stop it!” Twinker shouts.

“My penis has already been through enough,” D.H. sulks. “It doesn’t need to hear your insults.”

“Skip, maybe all you need to do is fall in love—only not with your mom. With someone who’s more right for you.”

“Would you know any volunteers?” Skip asks, looking at Twinker meaningfully.

“I might. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Hey, look! Ted’s about to get lucky again,” says Jimmy. “Go, Ted!”

Ted and the brunette are back in the bedroom. Ted, already naked, sips from a glass of wine as the brunette slips out of a sexy black velvet dress. He’s about to join her on the bed when he grabs his wounded arm and keels over like a polar bear stunned by a tranquilizer dart. He lies on the bed, paralyzed, while the brunette climbs on top of him and reopens the wound so she can lap up his blood. The door creaks open and the blonde enters wearing a lacy see-through nightgown. She takes a turn licking at Ted’s bloody arm. Aroused, the brunette yanks the blonde’s hair and they kiss with flickering tongues. The blonde then takes off her clothes and the two women engage in a blood-frenzied lesbian petting session on top of poor, mostly inert Ted.

“How do you usually feel right after you’ve jumped your mom’s bones, Skip?” Gordon asks him, point-blank. “Honestly.”

“Honestly? Tired, guilty, depressed, kind of pissed off that I’ve let her screw me again... but mostly just out of it. A lot like Ted there, I guess.”

“That’s the way my mom makes me feel, too,” says Gordon, “only she does it in a different way. She’s the Queen of the Put-Downs, always telling me I’m lazy, or I smell bad, or I look like a freak. She acts

like I should give her Brownie points for being candid about having a son she hates. On top of that, she's a nit-picky perfectionist when it comes to anything I do, like I can never be good enough, but when it's something *she* has to do, she cuts herself all kinds of slack. And if anything ever goes wrong in her life, she always finds a way to blame it on me. Basically, she loves sapping my energy. She feeds off it."

"Like a vampire," says Skip, starting to get it.

"Exactly! A psychic vampire! Just being around her makes me feel drained. She's like an emotional black hole, sucking up my life force, my will to live. Maybe that's why the world has this fascination with vampires. We've all met people who do it in real life, only we're not quite aware of it because it's happening on a subconscious level, with energy instead of blood. Your mom does it by tricking you into sex so she can drain your youth, or whatever... and my mom does it by making me feel bad so she can feel good."

"My mom really, *really* likes it when I eat out her snatch—especially when she's on the rag," Skips says. "Do you think that could be another vampire thing?"

"No, Skip," Twinker says, laughing. "That's just a normal girl thing. Unless you think I'm a vampire, too."

"I guess we won't really know until you have sex with us."

"Dream on, James."

"Have any of you guys read Goethe's *Faust*?" Gordon asks.

"Sure—*twice*, right after I blazed through the complete works of Shakespeare," says Skip. "Get real, Crash."

"Don't drag a bunch of books into this now," Jimmy warns him. "You were doing pretty good with the vampire stuff."

"Books are our friends, Jimmy.... What I was just thinking about was how out of all the things Faust sees while he's with Mephistopheles—who's sort of the devil—what scares Faust the most is the Mothers."

D.H. jokes, "As in the Mothers of Invention? Frank Zappa's old band?"

"No, the Mothers as in the archetypal bitch goddesses. The ones who create all life—and sometimes destroy it."

"Oh. *Them*."

“Let me give you guys just one example. This is all tied together, I swear.... In the Book of Baruch, which is one of the oldest Gnostic texts—as old as the Bible—there’s a story about the creation of the world that involves a goddess named Edem.”

“Eden?” Twinker’s not sure she heard right.

“*Edem*. It’s the Hebrew word for ‘earth.’ Eden is the word for ‘paradise.’ Close, but not quite the same. Anyway, Edem has the hots for Elohim, which is the Hebrew word for ‘god.’ So the heavenly father god and the earthly mother goddess fall in love. After a while, it’s just like they’re married. They decide to move in together and start a family, so they create paradise and make Adam, the first man. Elohim breathes spirit, or *pneuma*, into Adam. And Edem breathes soul, or *psyche*, into Adam. Then they make Eve in the same way—so all the people that come after Adam and Eve will possess both soul and spirit.”

“I always thought spirit and soul were the same deal,” says Skip.

“The Gnostics differentiate. Spirit is from above, from the heavens—or from the superconscious, transpersonal Self, if you want to put it in Jungian terms. Soul is from below, from the earth or the shamanic underground—what Carl Jung called the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious.”

“Gee, I’m glad we’ve got that straight,” Jimmy says, tipping back a beer.

“Anyway...” says Gordon, ignoring him, “after creating the world and mankind, Elohim rises to the highest part of heaven to see how everything looks from up there. And what he finds when he gets there is a light that’s even brighter than the sun he’s just created. This light is the supreme force in the universe. It’s called the Good. And Elohim says to the Good, ‘Oh shit, I screwed up. I thought I was the highest god, but obviously I’m not. Now I want to stay up here in heaven, but my spirit is trapped below in all those clueless people. Let me go blow up that crappy little world, so I can get my spirit back.’ But the Good says, ‘Nothing that comes from love can be evil. You and Edem made the world out of your love and now you have to let her keep it for as long as she wants. But while you’re waiting for her to get tired of it, you can hang out with me and we’ll stay high together.’ So that’s what

Elohim does. He turns his back on the world and stays with the Good in heaven.”

“I guess he didn’t love Edem that much, after all...” Twinker says.

“The feeling I got was that Elohim wanted Edem to go with him, but she decided she liked living in the suburbs better,” says Gordon.

“And what’s more important, anyway?” Jimmy asks rhetorically. “Having a wife, or hanging out with your friends?”

“Friends!” everyone shouts except Twinker.

“So then what happened?” Twinker asks Gordon, humoring him.

“Then Edem got really pissed. She felt like that flaky Elohim had ditched her. So she decided to get even. She gathered her angels around her—including the serpent, *Naas*—and she told them to go and incite adultery and divorce among the world’s people. Edem thought that if people felt unloved and abandoned, like she did, then the trapped spirit in them would pass those feelings directly on to Elohim. Edem also commanded the angels to torture people in every way they could think of, so Elohim would feel tortured, too—again, because of his trapped spirit.”

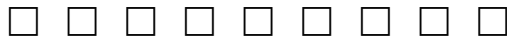
In later Gnostic literature, the vengeful angels would become Archons, the Good would become synonymous with the True God, Edem would transform into Sophia (or possibly Eve), and Elohim would turn into the nefarious Demiurge—but Gordon doesn’t want to risk confusing his audience by going into all that now. He simply concludes by saying:

“So that’s why the world is such a fucked-up place. When Elohim ascended to heaven and discovered the Good, he showed the way for everyone who wanted to follow him with their own divine spirit. But because he left Edem behind, he also kick-started the whole process of evil against his spirit in the world’s people. Which brings us right back to the subject of vampires.”

“Finally!” says Jimmy.

“Vampires prey on the spirit in others. In this world—where evil prospers and good people suffer—the more spirit you have, the more likely you are to be attacked for it. And it all started with a self-pitying mother taking out her anger on her innocent sons and daughters.”

Screams and cries for mercy resound throughout the drive-in as the lesbian vampires go on a rampage, stabbing another man in their wine cellar, then slashing the throats of the young campers in the trailer. The gory devastation is relentless. By the movie's end, everyone has been killed except Ted—who drives off in his little blue car, already dead.



“We have to save Skip by taking him to see Madame Sophie!”

That rallying cry comes from Jimmy. *Hollywood She-Wolves* turned out to be pure, hardcore porn: aspiring actresses sucking and fucking absolutely anyone so they could get a part in a movie. Skip moaned all the way through it, saying he didn't think he'd have the will to resist his mother's sexual advances once he got home. Jimmy's plan is to subvert a greater evil with a lesser one. From police station rumors brought home by his father, Jimmy has heard that Madame Sophie's palm reading parlor is a suspected front for a bordello. He reasons that if a fortune-telling whore can get Skip's rocks off, then Skip won't have to spend the rest of the night banging his insatiably horny mom.

Finding the place shouldn't be a problem. Everyone knows where Madame Sophie lives. At night her name blazes across the top of a big circular sign with a finger-splayed palm in its center outlined in pink neon. The sign sits on top of a gas station pole beside a flat-roofed cinderblock house fronting the highway near downtown Selma: *Madame Sophie—Fortunes Told*.

So now everyone is squeezed into Hideous' truck (a thunderstorm dumped its watery load during the first anal-penetration scene, forcing them to watch the remainder of the movie from inside the cab with the windshield wipers going). The windows are fogged with the warmth of their bodies and beery breath. Hideous turns on the defroster and pulls out of the drive-in with the comfortingly melancholy sound of tires hissing on wet asphalt. He tunes the radio to KKDJ—Fresno's only decent rock station. After a few miles, Traffic's "The Low Spark of High-Heeled Boys" segues into Vanilla Fudge doing a live version of the old Supremes hit, "You Keep Me Hangin' On." Jimmy cranks the

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volume and everyone starts to sing along to the spontaneously revised lyrics:

*Set me free why don't you, Mom.
Get outta my life why don't you, Mom.
You really don't love me.
You just keep me bangin' on....*

D.H. and Skip—woozy and off-key—especially like the parts where they get to howl along as backup singers.

They're all thinking about how great it feels to be young and fucked-up, crushed together like stowaways on a pirate ship as Hideous hurtles them through the blustery autumn night. The glittering wet highway looks like an alien landing strip with its wall of wind-whipped oleander in the median. As they near Selma, ghostly signs of human habitation appear in the truck's headlights: a window painted green from the light of a TV set, a white mailbox surrounded by foxtails, the reflective topaz eyes of a cat out on a front porch, hunting for mice. As they pass, everything slides back into oblivion.

No one cares how late it is. They just want to keep having fun. If this night ended up lasting forever, in their minds that would be all right.

"Take a left," Jimmy says. "I think it's up here, past the train tracks."

A smaller version of Madame Sophie's neon highway sign hangs from a lamppost up ahead, the bigger sign towering beyond it. Hideous pulls to the curb in front of the desolate-looking cinderblock house. Dusty venetian blinds are turned shut behind all the windows. There's no grass in the front yard—only a bed of gypsum pebbles that in the rain looks like a sandbar made of rotten molars. The front door is painted a dark Chinese red, deepening toward black along the edges. The light bulb jutting from a porcelain socket above the front porch is red, too.

"Looks like nobody's home," D.H. says.

Jimmy says, "Who wants to go knock?"

"We should all go," says Gordon. He can tell no one wants to do it alone.

"I wait in twuck in case you need fast getaway," Hideous says as everyone else gets out.

"I'm not sure this is such a great idea," says Skip. "I mean, no one knows we're here. We could get robbed, or kidnapped—"

"—or righteously laid," Jimmy says. "Don't get all pussyfied on us now, Skip."

Jimmy runs ahead and knocks on the door. Everyone else huddles on the porch with him to get out of the rain. They can hear someone moving around inside. After a moment, the door cracks open and a dark face appraises them from behind the brass safety chain. "Hi! We're here to get our palms read," Jimmy blurts out.

"It's very late." An older woman's voice. Gruff. No nonsense.

"I know... but we have money. And my friend here could really use some astral guidance." Jimmy puts the emphasis on the *ass* in astral, causing D.H. to bite down on a short, sharp laugh. It comes out sounding like a coyote's yelp.

Twinker puts in a good word for them. "They're very spiritual boys," she says.

"Okay," the voice says. "You can come in... but leave those wet shoes outside." Interior lights go on as the woman unhooks the door chain, revealing herself as an amazingly obese middle-aged gypsy lady with platinum blonde bobbed hair. She's wearing a turquoise felt dress embroidered with flowers and butterflies. Her eyebrows—drawn on, inverted V's—have been painted in the same garish turquoise hue. She looks like a slightly more feminine version of Divine—the 300-pound transvestite actor in the John Waters movie, *Pink Flamingos*, who was filmed in that movie's finale gleefully eating dog shit as it was squeezed like Mr. Softy's ice cream from a hunching mongrel's butt.

Madame Sophie is a joke, thinks Gordon as he kicks off his tennis shoes.

He's the first one inside. "*My, my, my...*" Madame Sophie says, taking Gordon's hand. "Your father walked in right behind you. He's here with us now. He wants you to keep an open mind, hon.... He says he died in a plane crash. And while he was with us—wait, it's coming to me.... Oh, goodness! He's telling me he had a tremendous whanger."

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Gordon is shocked, to say the least. *How could she know that?* There had been newspaper stories about the plane crash, of course, but to the best of his knowledge his own picture never accompanied them—and certainly none of them had mentioned the size of his father's endowment. Is Madame Sophie somehow acquainted with a close family friend? What other possible explanation could there be?

"Gordon. Are you okay?" Twinker asks, coming up behind him.

"Um, yeah..." Gordon says, coming back to himself. He asks Madame Sophie, "How'd you know that?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, love.... Gather around, children," she says as Jimmy, Skip, and D.H. gingerly step across the maroon shag carpet, feeling meek in their stinky socks. Madame Sophie arranges everyone into a circle and stands in the center. She asks them all to join hands. "Let me explain something before we begin," she says. "I'm a Spiritualist medium, as opposed to a plain old psychic. Basically, what that means is I don't read minds or see into the past or future on my own. Well, not much, anyway.... Instead, what I do is talk to spirits. Now there are good spirits and bad spirits, just like there are good and bad people. I try to stick with the good ones. But I never know for sure who'll be coming through, or what they'll have to tell me. Just so you know, sometimes the messages can seem a little harsh, but whatever the spirits say almost always turns out to be true. For instance, I got a feeling I already rang *your* bells pretty loud," Madame Sophie says, looking at Gordon. "Your father has passed over. Isn't that right, hon?"

Gordon only nods his head. He has the queasy feeling that Madame Sophie can see straight through to his soul. He's afraid of what she'll find there. Her freaky turquoise eyebrows are twitching at him with compassion. To avoid her gaze, Gordon looks around at the room they're standing in: seashell pink walls, lots of candles and crystals, statues of Saint Francis, Ganesh, and Buddha, a poster illustrating chakras in a rainbow of colors. *No sign of hookers....*

"Okay!" Madame Sophie suddenly claps her doughy hands. "For fifty dollars I'll contact the spirit world for you as a group. Because right now I'm getting the feeling that your group destiny is more important than your individual destinies—at least at this point in time. Okay? So do we have a deal?"

“Fifty bucks!” Jimmy says, as if outraged by the skyrocketing cost of spiritualists.

“It’s the price of admission,” Madame Sophie says with a wink. “Astral guidance isn’t cheap.” Emphasis on the *as* in astral, just as Jimmy pronounced it. She shakes her enormous blubbery hips. Not much gets past Madame Sophie, literally or figuratively.

D.H. points out that it’s only ten bucks apiece—hardly more than the price of a ticket to a zombie movie—a relative bargain if they get to talk to actual dead people.

They all pony up. Madame Sophie stuffs the money into the pockets of her ugly turquoise dress and goes into a trance. “Okay, excuse me for what I’m about to say to you, but the spirits are telling me—” she cocks her ear as if listening, eyes closed—“they’re telling me a very big change is coming for all five of you. It’s happening in the next six months. For each of you, this is an event that will change the course of your whole life. Some of you may choose to pass over at this juncture. It’s very unusual. What I’m hearing is... no, it’s not clear. Six months. A secret will be revealed. The betrayer will betray himself. The outcome will depend on every one of you. I’m sorry, but nothing more can be said.”

“Well, that was vague...” D.H. complains.

“You want something more specific? You—” Madame Sophie says, turning to D.H., her eyes still closed—“you hurt yourself in a fall. They’re telling me it wasn’t an accident. You were meant to have empathy, to know what it’s like to be both man and woman in this life. Don’t laugh!” she says as Jimmy starts snickering. “That’s how the angels are sexed. I know it seems like a burden, but in truth, it’s a great compliment.”

“I’m sorry, lady,” Jimmy says, “but if a fiberglass pole got rammed through *my* penis, I sure as hell wouldn’t take it as a compliment.”

“Oh, you’re the devious one, aren’t you? Everyone here has a pure heart except for you,” Madame Sophie says, wheeling on Jimmy, her voice turning masculine. “You take pride in being the smirker. The mocking one. You’re the only one who seeks to do evil, but your evil almost always turns out for the good. Your lesson in life is to discover compassion. Right now you think every person on Earth is governed by selfishness. Not true, Little One, not true....”

"This is so bogus," Jimmy says.

"Dude, she's got you nailed," says Skip.

"You're the handsome one," Madame Sophie says, stroking Skip's biceps like a blind woman. Her voice is womanly again, almost purring. "Without knowing how, you make women lust after you—even the ones who are wrong for you. Wait... I take that back. *Especially* the ones who are wrong for you. You attract the kind of woman who can only give you... how can I put this delicately? Oh, I'll just say it! She gives you a karmic shit-kicking—okay? Let me ask you something. Are you in a relationship right now?"

"Well, kind of..." Skip squirms.

"And do you find this relationship fulfilling?"

"It's, um, a little complicated."

"I'll bet it is. The spirits are telling me you're in grave danger. The person you're with now has been with you in several lives before this one. In many of those past lives, you hated each other."

"We did?"

"That's why the sex is so great."

"It is? I mean, yeah, it is, but—"

"She wasn't always your mother."

Skip, and everyone else, is blown away.

"Now..." Madame Sophie says, "they're telling me you came here for a purpose that's different than just me telling you what you already know. And I don't want you to be disappointed. So what you can do is go down that hallway behind me. Back on the right, you'll find a little red bedroom. Go in there and do whatever you need to do. And you, dear—" pointing to Twinker—"go with him. He can't be expected to make the right decision on his own. But your mind is clear, love. You have the purest heart I've seen in ages. You'll make the right choice. You always do. *Choose for him.*"

"Um, okay, I guess...." says Twinker. "But I have to say, this is pretty weird."

"You'll understand better once you get there."

"She doesn't, like, have to stay for the whole show, does she?" asks Skip, feeling a wave of performance anxiety.

"Only if she wants to. Now go. *Shoo!* Don't think about mommy!"

Madame Sophie watches as Skip and Twinker disappear down the dark hallway. Then she turns to Gordon, Jimmy, and D.H. and says, “Sometimes we have a nemesis that follows us from one lifetime to the next. For some people, there can even be more than one. Their purpose is to keep banging up against us, in life after life, until we both get some spiritual sense knocked into us. A nemesis’ negativity can be a far more powerful tool for learning than the pussyfied sayings of some life-fearing good person.”

“Did you just say *pussyfied*?” Jimmy asks her.

“That’s one of his favorite words,” Gordon tells her.

“I used it for a reason,” Madame Sophie says. “Don’t think I don’t know about the two of you.”

“What’s that mean?” Jimmy asks, maintaining a look of innocence.

“You wouldn’t admit it even if I told you. You’re so contrary. But *you*—” she says, looking at Gordon—“you’re more of a psychic than I am. And the spirits would tell you secrets undreamed of, if you’d only pay attention.”

“How do I do that?” Gordon asks.

“Solitude and meditation. Engage the world, then retreat, like the beating of a heart. Find people to love, who love you. And stop drinking so much beer.”

“You *do* drink a lot of beer, Crash...” D.H. says.

“Gallons,” says Jimmy with mock-disapproval.

“Oh, and like you guys don’t?”

“Yeah, but we’re not natural-born holy monk Spiritualist dudes, like you. Did the spirits mention that he falls down a lot?” D.H. asks Madame Sophie.

“That’s just his way of going into a spiritual trance,” she says. “Until he learns to meditate, there’ll be a lot of that.”

“Great,” says Gordon. “Do you offer classes?”

“I could teach you, but I won’t be here long enough. I’m moving to Santa Barbara next week. I’ve had it with the damp cold and the tule fog every winter.”

“I guess with what you do, you can pretty much live anywhere.”

“That’s what I figured. So I’m taking my fat ass to the beach. Can’t you just see me in a bikini?” Madame Sophie strikes a pin-up pose—

one hand on her hip, the other behind her head—and laughs as Jimmy and D.H. shudder.

She may be butt-ugly, thinks Gordon, but I like her.

From down the hallway, they all suddenly hear the muffled sounds of bedsprings squeaking and a series of steady, rising moans. Skip has apparently made his selection. A woman's voice begins to coo and gasp: "Oh, that's it! God. Harder. Ooh. Unhhh.... Yes. God. *Yes! God! Harder!*" Flesh slaps against flesh. A rhythmic thumping is added to the chorus of sounds—the bed's headboard pounding against a wall.

"Go, Skip!" D.H. says. Gordon and Jimmy laugh a little uneasily. They're both sporting hard-ons. Madame Sophie blatantly checks out their packages.

"A young man's lust can be such a good thing," she says, sighing. "It gets you into all the right kinds of trouble. I don't know why people insist on demonizing it."

A low, throaty grunting joins the insistent squeaks and thumping. That would be Skip. It sounds like he's close to coming. In the next instant there's a huge crash and the woman's voice yells, "*Ayeee! ¡Caramba!*" Then they hear Skip groan, "Oh, God!" as the woman laughs, shrieks, and keeps laughing.

"They broke the bed," Madame Sophie declares. "Good for them!"

There's more thumping and crashing. It sounds like something heavy is being scraped across a cement floor. Then after a brief interlude, Skip and Twinker emerge from the darkened hallway, looking a bit disheveled. They're holding hands and shyly grinning.

"I don't believe it..." D.H. says.

"Twinker, that was *you*?"

Twinker approaches Madame Sophie, trying to look contrite. She whispers, "I'm so sorry, but we had a little accident back there. The bed somehow just... *collapsed*."

"I know," Madame Sophie says, patting her dimpled cheek. "You both fucked it to pieces. The spirits told me you would."

"You're not mad at us?"

"Mad? How could I be mad about something that was foretold in heaven?"

"We could pay you for it," Skip offers.

“Don’t even think about it. That bed was never used. It was for overnight guests, but I don’t like having guests.”

“So wait...” Jimmy says, “this place isn’t really a whorehouse?”

“A whorehouse?” Madame Sophie laughs. “Young man, I’m the only one who lives here, and who would dare? I mean, really—*who would dare?*”

Certainly not any of them.



After they leave Madame Sophie’s, Hideous drives everyone home, dropping Gordon off last. Gordon thanks Hideous for the ride, then quietly unlocks his front door and tiptoes into the den, hoping to avoid waking his mother. He still feels like he’s drunk, or stoned, or accompanied by spirits. (*Hi, Dad!*) Whatever he’s under the influence of, he’s certainly in no condition to deal with another lecture from his mother—or worse, a tag-team nude reprimand from his mother and Uncle Gerald. It’s hard to say you’re sorry to a pair of outraged sagging tits and a disappointed penis bobbing up and down like a foreskin-covered Slinky. Gordon knows. He’s tried.

“Gordon? *Gordon!*”

For a split-second Gordon thinks he’s busted, but then he realizes it’s only Derek crying out for him, waking from a bad dream. He lurches down the hallway into Derek’s room and closes the door behind him, hoping his mother will remain oblivious to his little brother’s cries. She usually does. Gordon has been the one to get up at all hours of the night with Derek, from the day he came home from the hospital—feeding him, changing him, rocking him back to sleep. Cynthia’s mothering instincts haven’t improved with a second child. If anything, she’s worse.

Gordon goes over to Derek’s crib, which stands out from the shadows like a circus cage in the dim illumination from a Winnie-the-Pooh nightlight. Derek is standing up inside it clutching the top rail, bawling. At three years old, he’s just about ready for the bunk beds that Gordon built for him against the far wall, but Derek claims he likes the crib better—because it protects him from nightmares.

Not tonight, apparently. “Derek, what’s wrong?” Gordon gently picks him up.

The crying subsides as Derek wraps his arms around Gordon’s neck and feels his big brother’s hand patting him on the back. Through jerky sobs and sniffles, Derek tells him, “F-F-Farmer—uh, F-Farmer François couldn’t stop farting!”

That statement provokes another burst of bawling.

Aside from looking like a werewolf for the first three months of his life, Derek has been a fairly normal child. But there *is* one glaring peculiarity: he’s terrified of his own farts. Every time a burst of flatulence catches him by surprise, Derek jerks his head around and starts like a gun has just gone off. Sometimes he drops things, or cries real tears. Gordon has often entered rooms and found Derek bent over looking between his legs, wild-eyed with horror, as if a thunderbolt had just discharged in his diaper.

“Who’s Farmer François, Derek?” Gordon asks him.

Derek sobs, “He was me!”

A few odd thoughts about reincarnation occur to Gordon (it’s been that kind of a night), but he decides Derek probably isn’t ready to have that discussion, so he only says, “You must’ve had a nightmare.”

“No! It was real!” A toddler’s sense of indignation stanches Derek’s tears.

“If it was real, then Farmer François would be here stinking up the room with us. I think you just dreamed him.”

Derek gets a thoughtful look on his three-year-old face. “I think he died,” he says.

“He farted himself to death?”

“Yep!” Derek giggles. “He—he farted a real stinky cheese!”

“He cut the cheese and died?” Gordon just rolls with it. “He croaked on his own butt fumes?”

“Yep!” Derek sings, “He farted a horse! He’s dead, of course!”

Unbeknownst to Gordon, from that moment on Derek will never be afraid of his farts again. In fact, like most little boys, he’ll learn to revel in them.



Okay, so that was my big fart breakthrough. Whoop-dee-fuckin'-doo.... I'm sure you're all glad to know my farts won't be scaring the shit out of me anymore. (I'll get off this scatological kick shortly, I promise.) If it had been up to me, the whole subject never would've come up in the first place, but I have to admit it proves a point: traumas from our past lives can affect us in the lives we're living now.

Like I told you earlier, in my last incarnation I was a boring old French farmer who died from eating unpasteurized cheese. The gas pains were really incredible, like a fleet of tiny Hindenburgs exploding in my colon. I carried a memory from that past life trauma into my new life as little Derek. So understandably, I had a phobia about farts. On an unconscious level I was thinking, Farting = Death. But then Gordon helped me remember that it was my prior self, as Farmer François, who died doing the Death Fart Dance and not the current me. All of a sudden, horrendous farting seemed kind of funny instead of threatening, and the phobia went away. Still, I'll never be all that big on eating cheese. And as for Brie or anything else that looks like congealed snot inside a furry white pancake—just forget it. There's no way.

Making past life memories conscious not only helps you get over weird phobias—it also helps you recover old talents and skills. Like, say you were really great at playing the piano in a past life. In your new life you could be a prodigy. In fact, almost all child prodigies are just picking up where they left off in a previous life, with a little hitch as they get used to their fresh young bodies. The greatest talents adapt to the changing times and make what was old seem new again—Mozart reincarnated as Jimi Hendrix.

My former talent for milking cows isn't going to help me much in this coming life. Neither are the nautical skills I picked up as a deckhand on an 1830's whaling schooner. (But there lies another phobia for me to get past: I won't be too keen on deep-sea fishing anytime soon because, as my three-year-old self remembers, Sharks will bite your butt off!) What I really have going for me are my past life experiences with Gordon. We'll be counting on each other for a lot in this segment of the Earth Adventure Series, so it's nice to know we have all that shared history. It makes communicating much easier. Already, it's almost as if we can read each other's thoughts. Of course, we don't even come close to the telepathy everyone has on the Other Side—but we're doing pretty good by earthly standards.

A crude sort of telepathy is easy when you're three. At that age the line is still blurred between magical thinking and rationality—there's very little sense of what you can or can't do. At the same time, memories of your past lives and the Other Side are still as vivid as they'll ever be, outside of death or the womb. Soon, however, the money-grubbing, warmongering, materialistic world we live in will try to shackle you to its collective delusions about what is and isn't possible—and then the doubting of your spiritual existence begins.

To transcend the constraints of the soul-squelching status quo, you need to cultivate what John Keats, in a letter to his brothers in 1817, called Negative Capability: "...when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."

Keats knew what he was talking about. He had one of the all-time great daimons on his side. His life showed all the hallmarks. He was born in obscurity (his parents owned and operated a horse stable). He was acquainted with death from an early age (a brother died in infancy, his father died after being thrown from a horse when Keats was only ten, his mother succumbed to tuberculosis four years later, as did his brother, Tom, four years after that). He suffered from a terminal disease (tuberculosis again—first choice among daimons for communicating with their 19th-century charges—along with a dash of gonorrhea). His greatest work was accomplished in the last years of his life (he died at twenty-five) while his health was inexorably deteriorating. In fact, three of his most famous poems ("Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," and "Ode on Melancholy") were written in just over a week—a feat unequalled until 1969, when Neil Young wrote "Cinnamon Girl," "Down by the River," and "Cowgirl in the Sand" in one afternoon while he was knocked out with the flu. (Just so you know, I didn't draw that comparison to make you think that Keats actually came back as Neil Young—but hey, stranger rebirths have happened.)

Anyway, getting back to Negative Capability... Keats explained it as the ability to be open to mystery, to experience it, without having to find logical explanations for that mystery's existence. Some things, like love, can never be fully explained. And how about truth, beauty, God, or the spirit's immortality? You get the idea....

It's kind of like the Zen doctrine of No Mind. You have to still the mind's constant chatter and in its place create a receptive emptiness. All of your certainties, preconceived notions, fixed concepts, and strongly held opinions have to go by the wayside. Forget about the laws of science, the

conventional wisdom passed on to you by your parents, and whatever you were taught in Sunday school. Take some time to be open to the mystery, The Way, Gnostic insight, your soul's prompting—whatever you want to call it. Just don't try to explain it. Live with it. Be it. See where it takes you.

I mean, what else is there, in any average, ordinary, mundane life as it's lived on this planet, aside from the exhilaration that comes from reconnecting with the Divine?

As you become more adept at entering the state of Negative Capability, you may find yourself right in the thick of weirdness. Synchronicities could become commonplace. You might find you have the ability to see ghosts and spirits. Spirits from the Other Side will certainly become more interested in seeing you. Negative Capability allows them to communicate with you, if you're willing. But take it from Gordon, it's a real trick to keep your mind from that "irritable reaching after fact & reason" when a numinous shaman has just handed you the meaning of life along with a slice of pepperoni pizza.

That shaman was Gordon's daimon, by the way, turning up for a rare personal appearance. Since daimons don't actually assume physical form, what everyone saw was filtered through their own subconscious perceptions of what a wise entity like a daimon might look like. So Gordon saw a shaman, because like any halfway good teenage mystic scholar he's been reading Carlos Castaneda and Mircea Eliade. Twinker saw an old woman because in her family the wisest person around is her maternal grandmother. And D.H. saw an alien because... well, because he's D.H. and that's just how his whacked-out mind operates. Jimmy and Skip didn't see anything at all because they weren't on the same soul-wavelength; to use Madame Sophie's Sufi-derived terminology, "their hearts weren't pure enough."

Because it was Gordon's daimon, only Gordon was able to hear what the daimon had to say. But even that was filtered through the language of Don Juan and those other peyote-puking sorcerer-types: "There's a part of you that's immortal. But you must go deeper into the physical, and be tempered by its onslaughts, before you reach your eternal apotheosis."

Well, dub.... We don't incarnate in these crap-ass human bodies because we actually enjoy being terrified babies who think they're about to die a horrible death every time they launch a fart. (I'm sorry... I guess I'm getting a little too personal here, but being stuck inside a toddler's body is reminding me of just how much life can really suck. Things will be better

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

when I'm old enough to eat barbecued iguanas and make myself sick on peyote buttons, like Castaneda's buddies.)

Compared to the Other Side, material existence is a nightmare. Sometimes life on Earth can feel like running through a haunted house with your hair on fire. At other times it can feel like you're being ground down to nothing with triviality, boredom, and bullshit problems. (And who came up with the brilliant idea that we should all have to work for a living, anyway? Right after I turn ten, I'll be pissing away the glorious summers of my youth by spending eight hours a day counting nuts and bolts in a hardware store. How stupid is that?) But the truth is we wouldn't be here if life didn't have lessons to teach us. Lessons that can't be learned on the Other Side, for whatever reason. Lessons about love. Lessons about loss. Lessons about power, guilt, anger, betrayal, and fear. And you can read all you want about those lessons, and listen to other people tell stories about them, but if you're truly going to understand those lessons on a deep soul level, you'll have to go through them yourself. There's no other way. You have to experience them.

Keats put it this way: "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced—Even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it."

So like I said, we map out all the major events in our upcoming lives on Earth before we come down here, signing up in advance for the sometimes harsh lessons our souls need to learn through physical experience. Destiny is the name for what we've chosen to do in life. Daimons kick our asses to make sure we do it—sometimes literally. By now you've probably figured out that Gordon's daimon was that ass-kicking Easter Bunny. But even I don't know why Gordon had to get rabbit-punched straight into the hospital way back then. Daimons work in mysterious ways, like that other guy ("Old Nobodaddy," William Blake called him). All I can say is it's a rough business, perfecting the human soul.

And just what exactly is a soul, anyway? Here's the way I understand it, if you really need an answer. Basically, while we're on the Other Side—or up in heaven, if you're more comfortable with that term—we exist as pure spirit. That's the part of us that never dies, our True Self, which will eventually merge with its creator (otherwise known as God, Allah, the Good, the One, or whatever...). But before that ultimate merger can take place, every spirit has to graduate from Earth School, which is kind of the spiritual equivalent of boot camp. Earth School is in session when a spirit gets together with a daimon and/or a bunch of guardian angels to chart another life on

Earth and incarnate as a soul in a physical body. The soul—or astral body, as the Tibetans like to call it—is the sum total of our conscious and subconscious thoughts and emotions that are oriented toward the realm of the spirit (the ego, or False Self, is whatever's leftover, oriented toward the body and the realm of matter). The soul exists as a body just as real as any physical body, although it's less dense because it's on a higher frequency or vibratory level (I'm sorry, but the analogies get fuzzy here...) in the cosmic continuum between matter and spirit.

Think of it this way: A spirit stays in heaven. A body is stuck on Earth. A soul can travel from Earth up to heaven (how high it goes depends on its level of perfection). And a daimon (as an emissary of the Light) can travel from heaven down to Earth. The various levels between heaven and Earth are what the Tibetan Buddhists call the Bardo—and that's where daimons and souls usually meet. Advanced souls stay in contact with their spirits through the agency of a daimon—the soul's mentor.

Each time we incarnate we add to our personal version of the Bardo (Bardo translates as “gap”), filling it up with the things and beings from our everyday existence, along with a random sampling of gods and archetypes from the collective unconscious and some of the flashier junk from our previous lives. The Bardo of a Manhattan real estate agent named Rupert, for example, won't look anything like the Bardo described in The Tibetan Book of the Dead—although I guess you can never completely discount the possibility of bleed-over. On a bad night 'Svānamukhā (dark blue, wolf-headed, carrying a human corpse to her mouth with both hands, her eyes staring) might very well emerge from within Rupert's brain and appear before him to trash an Upper East Side co-op right as he's about to close on it.

There's a point to all this, I can assure you. When a physical body dies, the soul finds out that its consciousness, as a soul, still exists—which usually comes as a big surprise. At the moment of death, the soul ascends through a gently inclined tunnel of light and is met on the Other Side by its own spirit, which appears as a luminous being, or more simply, the Light. If the soul has learned everything it needs to know from its time spent on Earth, then it merges with the Light in full consciousness. We're talking unity with the Divine here. Transfiguration. Earth School is over.

But what's more likely to happen, instead of merging, is that the soul just gets a glimpse of its own spirit, then rolls over and falls asleep. That sounds pathetic, I know, but most souls haven't consciously developed their

skills at astral travel, so it's hard for them to control anything once they've left their bodies. When they wake up again, they find themselves in the Bardo. And once souls end up there, they tend to get distracted by something-or-other in the Bardo's never-ending freakshow (dancing girls, a really cool mansion, 'Svānamukhā gnawing on grandma—it could be anything, really...). For a while, they forget about the Light. The Bardo is made of mental and emotional stuff, just like the astral body, and it has many entertaining and informative levels—with the human virtues up near the top (picture the life of Christ) and human evil down near the bottom (think Hitler). Each soul in the Bardo rises or falls through the varying densities until it finds its own level, where it stays until it gets bored and says something like, "This sucks. I want to go back to the Light." At that time, the soul dies and its spirit absorbs whatever experiences the soul had that fit into the scheme of heaven. (In this way the soul is kind of like that little black box recorder that the FAA guys always search for every time a jet crashes. It records everything right up until the final moment when our bodies crash. And they all crash—there's no use trying to deny that.)

After the soul dies, the spirit takes some time to mull over the soul's experiences, and then the whole process starts over. Chart, daimon, a new incarnation—done time and time again until the soul finally gets it right. It can take hundreds of lifetimes (or maybe even thousands—or millions—for all I know...). A soul rises through the Bardo as it achieves greater consciousness and compassion. But at the end of each successive lifetime, a soul doesn't always rise higher. Choices made in one lifetime can have a positive or negative impact on the next. As a general rule, whenever you get something that pleases your ego, you've usually traded away something that's important to your soul. That's just Basic Karma. But don't sweat trying to be perfect. Half the answers you need are already there in your mistakes. If you want to learn more, you can always sign up for Karma 101.

Obviously, Keats had just had a refresher course when his daimon inspired him to write: "Call the world if you Please 'The vale of Soul-making'. Then you will find out the use of the world."

That about sums it up exactly, only you should try to remember: we're the makers of our own souls.

LIFE EXPECTANCIES

Helen Swannson sits on a wrought-iron bench under the yellowing willow tree in her backyard, contemplating the shambles of the little pagoda that her grandson, Gordon, made for her while he was still in kindergarten. She's thinking about death. Not her own death, particularly—although she feels it will be coming soon—but rather, the experience of death in general. *Why does everyone have to leave?*

Her best friend across the street, Mabel Nyquist, lost her battle with breast cancer a year ago. The radiation treatments made her weak as a jellyfish and then all her pretty silver hair fell out during chemotherapy. Helen sat with her and brought over homemade peanut butter cookies and pink lemonade, but Mabel died, bald and bewildered, despite those efforts.

More recently, Harry Patterson, Helen's neighbor on the corner, keeled over from heatstroke this summer. He was only 65, but he should have known better than to be out mowing his lawn in ninety-degree weather. Harry was vain about his lawn. He'd planted his front yard with some new kind of clover-hybrid that required a lot of attention. He wanted to keep it green even during the dog days of August. One of the neighborhood boys riding by on a bicycle found him, Harry's flabby white belly rising up from the clover like a giant toadstool. The red gas-powered mower stood beside him, still spinning its blades and roaring for more.

Then there was the one she couldn't get over... her oldest son, Malcolm, dead in a plane crash some three years ago. Always the daredevil, Mal was. But to fly his Cessna straight into his very own house—*what on earth could he have been thinking?* Thank God Gordon and Cynthia hadn't been home when it happened.

There were oh-so-many people she'd known who were gone now. *That's what happens when you get old.* She supposes she should just be grateful that she's still alive, but her gratitude is wearing thin at the age of seventy-six. She can't see the point to any of it. Most people think of their lives as difficult to manage and full of drama, but really, what's the use of all that activity? All the scurrying and worrying, what does it amount to?

Besides, living isn't all that hard, when you get right down to it. You just muddle through your day and then you go to bed at night. When you wake up, you start all over.

Helen's day always begins with coffee. She still loves the smell of percolating coffee on a chilly autumn morning. It's one of the few pleasures left to her. That and the sound of her washing machine when it's in the middle of its rinse cycle—a sound like ocean waves lapping at the pilings of a pier. It reminds her of happier times with Milt in their cabin at Morro Bay, and later, with the boys. Mal had tried to make Gerald eat a dried-up old fish eyeball once, something he'd found on the beach. He had Gerald pinned in the sand and even though he was only six, little Gerald yelled, "*Eat it yourself, you goddam son-of-a-bitch!*" The language shocked her. And in public! She was so embarrassed. She couldn't remember whether Gerald had eaten the fish eyeball or not, but when she got him home she washed his mouth out with soap. Later, Milt found a baby quail under the back porch. The boys wanted to raise it as a pet—Mal even found a shoebox and lined it with soft green grass—but the bird was dead by morning. A broken neck. Gerald said a cat must have done it, but Helen had her doubts.

So many memories.... Her recollections and daydreams amount to pretty much the same thing these days, everything intertwined like a fat ball of wriggling eels in her brain. Her mind is going—she knows that much. What happened yesterday or last week is fuzzy at best, but scenes from forty, fifty, or even sixty years ago are still clear as day. She loses whole afternoons listening to the washer's rinse cycle while she sits in the pantry with her asthma machine, breathing vaporized vodka from the inhalation tube. It calms her, helps her think. During a hospital stay, a doctor once wrote on her medical chart that she was an alcoholic. *The nerve of him!* An innocent old woman with asthma, being

labeled that way.... *Boy, oh boy, did he ever get an earful.* By the time she was finished, that doctor's ears had turned so crimson they looked like the gill slits on a red snapper.

She often has dreams of the sea. Sometimes she's a walrus or a ball of quivering light in an underwater cavern where sharks swarm in on her from the shadows. Strange hieroglyphics are written in the sand on the ocean floor. There's a pirate's treasure hidden somewhere, but she can't find it. Giant manta rays swoop down at her like velvety bats and the sharks twitch their tails and bare their bloody, jagged fangs. She's never felt so lost and alone, so utterly desolate.

On the mornings after one of those dreams, she hits the asthma machine early. Then she gets behind the wheel of her 1973 Ford LTD Brougham and drives (well under the speed limit) to the Fashion Fair Mall in Fresno, where she can spend the whole day among other people, enjoying the free air conditioning.

She used to be quite the shopper in her day. Furs, cashmere sweaters, silk blouses, beaded handbags, and Italian shoes; dresses from Cristóbal Balenciaga, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Coco Chanel. But as she's gotten older, she's found it increasingly difficult to find flattering clothes. Inside, she still feels like an arthritic twenty-five-year-old, but when she looks in the dressing room mirror, she's appalled. Whenever she thinks of her famous décolletage on the Sunny Maid Raisins boxes and compares it with what she has now, it makes her want to howl. Not even a lifetime's worth of moisturizers and conditioners could prevent her from turning into the very product she used to represent—a shriveled-up San Joaquin Valley raisin (*although she makes a far better-looking raisin than most women do at her age, she can say in her defense*). Now she buys clothes for hiding in, rather than preening in. Most of her wardrobe, accordingly, is baggy and brown.

So shopping isn't as much fun as it used to be. Sometimes she misses that trance-like state she got into whenever she roamed the aisles of the better department stores. But being at Fashion Fair brings some of that feeling back for her.

Milt used to get the same hypnotic kick from running the lumberyard. When he talked about his day, sometimes he sounded just like a little boy with an elaborate train set. To hear him tell it, he started his business with one locomotive that chugged off to Chicago with

nothing behind it but a line of credit from the local bank. In Chicago's central hub, Milt's locomotive was coupled up with boxcars from all over the country: boxcars loaded with nails and ball peen hammers from Pittsburgh; flatcars stacked high with plywood from the coast of Oregon; still more boxcars weighted down with sacks of cement from Arizona. When the train got back to Kingsburg, Milt's men unloaded the whole kit-and-caboodle and sold it all to the local farmers. Then the train took off again with its boxcars full of the farmers' money. This time the train took a different route, stopping by the state capital in Sacramento and the White House in Washington, D.C. to drop off a few boxcars (*Milt believed in paying his fair share of taxes...*). Then the rest of the boxcars were uncoupled in Chicago in exchange for another round of goods and the whole business started over. Only this time, there was a difference (and this was the part Helen loved to picture): now, at the end of each train, there was a caboose, and in that caboose was something called *profits*—money she and Milt could spend.

Even during the Depression there had been enough cabooses to provide quite a nice life for them. People still needed to eat—and San Joaquin Valley farmers produced food in abundance. But after the war, when the vets returned home to raise families and build houses, the cabooses started coming in fast and furious. Suddenly, or so it seemed, they were rich.

So she never had to work. Why any woman would ever *want* to work... well, the very idea never made a lick of sense to her. Aside from the obvious superiority of being allowed to spend each and every day as one saw fit, *who would stay home to raise the children?* The feminist agenda was a disaster, in her opinion. As more women entered the workforce, the marketplace simply adjusted to absorb the increase in household income. In other words, housing prices shot up. Now women were *forced* to work because it took two people working full-time to maintain the lifestyle that one man used to be able to provide on his own.

Of course, without a job, there was always the problem of boredom. Milt never gave her the attention she thought she deserved. Especially in the early days, when the lumber business was just starting and he was off selling insurance every evening after work to cover the huge debts they had run up. She was young and pretty and there she

was, just sitting at home all by herself. So she entered the Sunny Maid Raisin Queen contest as a lark. But really, deep down, she wanted to show Milt she was still desirable—and *he'd better watch out*. When she won, Milt hardly batted an eye. So it was his fault, really, when she started the affair with Max.

Max with his constant laughter and lunging inside her, his stench of sweat and Havana cigars. The weight of him, his hairy chest almost smothering her. And always, when he rolled off her, the stories and lectures, the ambitious plans. Max was a talker, unlike Milt. *How she loved him for that!* But she still loved Milt, too. After all, he was providing for her. And he was never unkind. During the affair, she pretended to be frigid with Milt, but there had been some embarrassing overlaps. Her husband also had needs, sometimes too urgent to ignore. It pains her now to think of it, but she would just lie there like a petulant child, fists balled at her sides, refusing to look at him so she could better hide her orgasms. Things went on like that for quite a while, more than a decade. Then Milt found out about her affair in the most humiliating way possible, from some nosy Parker of a local policeman. Milt didn't horsewhip her, although she probably deserved at least that. Instead, he just withdrew from her, went inside himself. He asked her if she wanted a divorce. Feeling defiant and unjustly proud, she spent the next two weeks at Max's small house in Fowler. And then something happened that made her realize what a horse's ass she'd made of herself.

It was just a little thing, really... something that shouldn't have even mattered. She woke up early on a Sunday morning and asked Max if he wanted to go out for pancakes. Max was a heavy sleeper. He rolled over and mumbled to her, "Just let me get ten more minutes of shut-eye." Ten minutes turned into twenty, then an hour. She was starving. She remembered she had a Snickers bar in her purse (*all her life, she'd had a terrible sweet tooth...*) and so she ate that on an empty stomach. By the time Max woke up, the sugar had given her a pounding headache. "You still up for pancakes?" he asked her. She told him about her headache, complaining that it was his fault she'd eaten the candy bar. "My fault? How can it be my fault?" Max asked her. "Helen, don't you see? You're always blaming other people when

your own silly choices go wrong. Our friend Mister Sartre would call that an example of living in bad faith.”

So she was living in bad faith, was she? She'd never felt so insulted in all her life. She told Max, right then and there, that their affair was over. She went crawling back to Milt, begging him to give their marriage a second chance. It took Milt quite a while, but he eventually forgave her. Actually, she seduced him—and made it clear there would be no more acting frigid on her part from that point onward. Malcolm was born about nine months after he took her back.

Gerald arrived a year later, and then she was done. Early menopause set in not long after, drying up her libido (*poor Milt found himself shut out again*). Raising two rambunctious little boys while she was having hot flashes wasn't easy, but for the most part, she enjoyed it. Of course, there had been days when she felt like the both of them were sucking the life out of her with their endless, whiny demands. Gerald at the age of two had been especially trying in that regard. If he saw a wad of gum stuck to someone's shoe, he could scream, without tiring, “*Ger-Ger want gum-gum!*” fifty or sixty times at the top of his lungs. Fortunately, those days had been rare.

As the boys got older, she liked them a little less. It wasn't anything she would ever admit to anyone, but in her heart, she knew it was true. She watched insincerity creep into their smiles, saw them learning to lie and cheat and steal. She tried her best to instill a strong sense of values in them, but Milt was raising them to be businessmen. They'd be lost if they didn't know how to fake a smile and slip the knife in while telling people what they wanted to hear.

What a world, what a world....

Mal and Gerald sharpened their new skills on each other. There was nothing but hatred between the two of them. Always fighting, always tattling, trying to get the other one in trouble. It was like Cain and Abel. It didn't stop when they became adults, either. She could feel it when they were in the same room together—a low current of animosity that could erupt into a full-blown fistfight at any time. By then they were two giants. Gerald stood 6'-9" and Mal wasn't much shorter. (*Where did they get those genes? No one in her family, or Milt's, had been anywhere near that tall.*) It would have been ugly to see them go at it. Maybe that was why Mal drank so much around the holidays—so he

and Gerald wouldn't start pummeling each other with turkey legs and gravy tureens, or spattering each other with her special fiesta-green tapioca pudding.

Even after Mal's death, the sibling rivalry continued. What other reason could there be for Gerald moving in with Mal's hateful wife, Cynthia? Self-centered, sinful Gerald, a perpetual bachelor who up to that point had only fornicated with his young and lovely secretaries. (*Which left him wide open to sexual harassment claims, but did Gerald give two boots? No, he did not. And none of them could type worth beans, either....*) What could Gerald be getting from Cynthia that he couldn't get from any of those other women? (*He couldn't possibly want to become a surrogate father to Gordon. He's always treated Gordon like dirt....*) And what was Cynthia getting out of the arrangement? A widow spreading her legs for the brother of the man she'd been married to—didn't that make her feel somehow... *polluted*? Certainly the comparisons would be odious. Helen suspected her youngest son would never be able to live up to his deceased older brother in the bedroom department. Gerald was more than adequately endowed, but Mal had been born with a sea monster between his legs. A mother knows these things.

It makes her sad, but she's also fairly certain she knows why Gerald and Cynthia teamed up together now. It's such an ugly reason that she almost can't look at it straight on. She wants to keep denying it, but there's no use. Gerald keeps rubbing her nose in it these days, with all his talk about nursing homes and power-of-attorney agreements. *They want her cabooses!* Those two scheming greedy-guts want their grasping paws on the lumberyard's profits. They want her bank accounts and safe deposit boxes, her money markets and CDs, her stock portfolios and real estate deeds—*everything!* They want all the cabooses and they don't have the good graces, or even the common human decency, to wait until she dies.

She's sure this sinister plot is mostly Cynthia's doing. Helen's daughter-in-law has done nothing but despise her since the day she married Mal. And Mal's death left his family's finances in disarray. He died without life insurance. To make matters worse, his liquor store investment went belly up, draining Cynthia's cash reserves and ruining her credit rating. The only assets she has left are the house and Mal's lumberyard stock. Gerald, on the other hand, still has plenty. But he

has the soul of an accountant. It's not just a job for him. In Gerald's mind, there's no such thing as *enough*.

Both of the boys inherited stock in the lumberyard after Milt died from prostate cancer a dozen years ago, but Helen remains the controlling shareholder. And even if Cynthia and Gerald combined their shares, they still wouldn't have voting rights. There's only one way for them to gain control of the business. They have to get power-of-attorney and then get her declared legally incompetent.

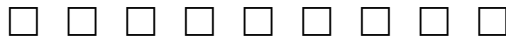
They must think of her as an ailing bag of bones, a decrepit old goblin with a leaky bladder, hell-bent on chewing up their inheritance with outrageous medical bills and ill-considered charitable donations. But her bladder is *just fine*, thank you. And the money is safe. Safer than it'll ever be once Gerald and Cynthia get their hands on it. She's always been a conservative investor. Milt taught her to steer clear of puffed-up stockbrokers and two-hundred-dollar-an-hour attorneys who always want to work in her "best interests." She manages her own money, buying dividend-paying stocks and corporate bonds in companies she can understand, like Plum Creek Timber and Pacific Gas & Electric. Even in down years she makes at least a 6% return on her investments. *Enough to live on....* Plus, she does her own housekeeping and Medicare takes care of all her doctor bills, so it's actually cheaper for her to stay where she is than to take a room in one of those horrendous nursing homes.

She's seen inside a few of those places—and they're not pretty. There's always a depressing Recreation Room full of old biddies sitting around in spill-proof vinyl lounge chairs, nodding off in front of a blaring television tuned to some insipid game show like *The Price Is Right!* A couple of white-whiskered geezers in creased navy blue suit jackets and flannel pajama pants—over-the-hill Lotharios—might be swanning it up with their canes over by the potted palms (*boys she probably grew up with and had no desire to kiss, even when they were young*). Usually there's a foul smell of unchecked bodily fluids and the buckets of Lysol used to mop them up. Open-mouthed drooling seems to be quite fashionable. Palsied limbs are all the rage. There's no way she's going to spend her last few years cooped up in one of those places. *Not while there's life in this old bird yet!*

Physically, she's still in tip-top condition, aside from her asthma and arthritis, which she's lived with for years. Her new forgetfulness is what she has to watch out for. Lately, she's been forgetting even the names of simple, everyday things. But Gordon has been helping her there. He checks in on her every morning on his way to school, and again when he heads home from work. He makes sure the stove hasn't been left on and he puts the chocolate-chip mint ice cream back in the freezer. He's such a good boy. He even helps her with her gardening. *(So sad that the little pagoda he made for her is almost in ruins! Is that what started all this ruminating?)* She sends Gordon a check for two dollars every week, as a Thank You for all his hard work, even though she knows she doesn't have to. He's family. He'd do it for nothing.

She notices it's getting along toward dusk. The sky above the Smiley's loquat tree has turned a deep sea blue with a high, thin layer of flesh-colored cirrus clouds running away toward the horizon. *How long has she been out here?* It feels like her whole life has just flashed in front of her eyes—like the stories one hears about skydivers with failed parachutes who are miraculously saved by landing in hay bales—but she can't remember if the whole show took mere seconds, or if she's been sitting outside all day. It's getting cold. She's only wearing a bathrobe over her negligee. *Where's Gordon?* she wonders. He usually helps her with dinner.

As she gets up to go inside, she sees a calico squid leap up onto her backyard fence. Surely it's odd, if not impossible, for a tentacled sea creature to be climbing fences in the middle of land-locked Kingsburg. But without thinking, Helen purses her lips and twitters like a parakeet. Then she calls out, *"Here, squiddy-squiddy-squiddy..."*



Halloween in Kingsburg smells of wet, uprooted weeds and car exhaust fumes. Gordon has been out with Derek, taking him on his first round of trick-or-treating. It was a kick watching Derek dart from door-to-door in the early twilight, collecting candy with his little black cape flapping behind him and a sweaty rubber Creature from the Black Lagoon mask suctioned to his three-year-old face. Derek had insisted

on wearing their dead father's sombrero as part of the costume, even though he was almost lost under it. He also wore a pair of Day-Glo orange Flintstones Underoos over black Oshkosh jeans (in the proud superhero tradition of wearing underwear on the outside of one's clothes) and he carried a dozen red roses in a cone of green tissue to give to his grandmother later. Judging by their neighbor's reactions, the costume made quite an impression.

Now they're walking up their grandmother's steep concrete driveway to deliver the roses. Gordon can hear the muted accordion thumping of a polka coming through the diamond-paned stained-glass windows in the double front doors. He rings the doorbell, but there's no response, so he lets himself in with his own key. Derek follows, yelling, "Grandma! Grandma!" from behind his rubber gill slits.

Inside they're greeted by the vision of their grandmother standing on top of the plastic-covered cushions of her living room sofa. She's wearing a clinging seashell pink negligee and moving about like a spastic flamingo, flapping her arms and shaking her pale, blue-veined legs, dancing the Watusi. Lawrence Welk is on the console TV set, all smiles and soap bubbles, with his particular brand of polka music blasting at distorted volume from the tweed-covered speakers.

Helen waves to them with a demented grin and shouts: "I recorded it on Betamax! Isn't it glorious?"

Although his grandmother's dance moves appear frail and feeble, there's enough rump-shaking going on to make Gordon nervous. Derek, without hesitating, hops up on the sofa and joins his grandmother, bouncing around underneath the big sombrero like a Mexican jumping bean.

Someone could break a hip here, thinks Gordon. He goes over to the television and turns down the volume.

The dancing peters out. "Party pooper," Gordon's grandmother says, blowing a wet raspberry and, outrageously, flipping him the bird. Her middle finger quavers like a cornstalk flung up into a tornado.

"More dancing!" Derek shouts. He bounces high off the springy sofa and lands, headfirst, on top of a pile of Harper's Bazaar and McCall's magazines fanned across his grandmother's coffee table. (The sombrero, meanwhile, spins away toward the fireplace like an alien

spacecraft set loose from a Tijuana chop shop.) There's a loud, hollow thud and then Derek tumbles to the floor.

"Jesus, Derek! Are you all right?"

"Ouchy-wawa..." Derek says, crawling up from the carpet with a hand to his rubber-clad skull. His flustered grandmother leans over and kisses his radioactive green fishmonster brow, cooing, "*Oh, my little halibut. Do you need a Band-Aid?*"

"Nope. I'm tough..." Derek prides himself on his ability to tolerate physical pain without crying. Only nightmares and farts rattle him enough to bring tears. And now not even farts scare him anymore. He laughs at them. (Here he lets off a sputtering *rat-a-tat* burst of flatulence to demonstrate his steely nerve.) He thinks of himself as heroic in his bravery, a three-year-old do-gooder with otherworldly powers. Perhaps someday soon he'll be recruited into the great pantheon of superheroes and live out the rest of his life battling evil in scenes of Saturday morning cartoon violence: *Mexican Lizardfishman vs. the Killer Robot Women From Mars!* Of course, Derek is only three, so these thoughts are rather inchoate, more intuited than articulated.

"I think somebody here needs to go poo-poo in the potty," his grandmother says, taking Derek by the hand. "*Phew-nee!*"

"No potty! I— I— not need to!" Derek says, struggling, his superhero dreams already lying in rubble. *Pendejo Fishmonster decimated in battle against the Legion of Hygiene and the Poo-Poo-in-the-Potty Brigade....*

"Just don't do it in your pants, okay?" Gordon says as their grandmother lets Derek go. "I don't want to have to clean you up later."

"I can go poo-poo by self," Derek says with grim finality. *And leap tall buildings in a single bound....*

Helen invites them to stay for dinner. She's having pork chops. But the pork chops are frozen and after defrosting them in the microwave, then frying them in a skillet, they end up tasting like chewy cardboard. Gordon and Derek enjoy the meal, anyway. They much prefer spending mealtimes with their grandmother, as opposed to sitting at a table with their scowling, naked mother and their cryptically muttering (and often itchy) nude uncle, both of whom make Gordon and Derek feel as though they're resented for eating the food placed in front of them. As if that food was too costly and dear to waste on such

annoying, undeserving children. As if that food represented all the fun and bare-assed frolicking being denied Gerald and Cynthia because they had to devote so much time and energy to raising said children. If Gordon had had the financial means to move out on his own, he'd have done so by now—and taken his little brother with him. Instead, he spends as little time at home as possible, and in consequence, more time taking care of his sweet but addled grandmother.

“Have some ambrosial grease,” Helen says, passing Gordon the gravy tureen. “There’s a pope’s nose in it for flavor.”

Addled isn’t even the word for it. *Borderline lunatic* is more like it. Helen is spinning off into full-blown senile dementia, and there are days when she doesn’t even recognize Gordon, or say anything that makes any sense. But there are other days when she seems to possess a kind of oracular wisdom and expresses herself in ways that strike Gordon as more spiritually enlightened than almost anything he’s ever heard or read. He’s beginning to believe that Alzheimer’s functions as a sort of pre-flight check for the *Bardo*, a way of preparing one’s soul for experiences that take place on a higher plane.

Gerald and Cynthia have made no bones about wanting Helen locked away in a nursing home. Gordon has heard his grandmother say over and over that she’d rather die than rot away in one of those places. He’s definitely on her side, doing all he can to help her. It makes him glad to see her kicking back at death and decrepitude, refusing to become another fearful, helpless victim. *Screw that*, his grandmother says. In her more lucid moments, she shares with Gordon what her dreams have been telling her: that each of us is in charge of our own de- and reincarnations, and at the end of life there’s nothing to fear. But the priests, judges, politicians, hospital administrators, and even her own relatives (present company excluded) don’t want her thinking that way. If she believes she has a handle on her own destiny, and if she doesn’t fear death, then she’s much less likely to be victimized. And that’s bad for business.

“So have you had any good dreams lately?” Gordon asks his grandmother. It’s their favorite topic for discussion.

“All my dreams these days are about the ocean. This little one here would fit right in.” Helen pats Derek’s shoulder as he tries to stuff an overloaded spoonful of mashed potatoes through the breathing hole in

his Creature from the Black Lagoon mask. “Y’know, sometimes I think you’re just the spitting image of your father,” she says to him with a grin.

“*Rammrrrrrr!*” replies Derek, raising his hands to her face like dinosaur claws as he makes scary monster sounds.

“You should take off your sombrero while you’re sitting at the table,” Gordon tells him. Derek mumbles a vague protest through another mouthful of mashed potatoes, but removes the offending hat. “So what happens in these ocean dreams?” Gordon asks his grandmother.

“Oh, all sorts of things,” Helen tells him. “I’m usually underwater, down there with the fanged uglies from the deep. Sharks try to bite me, I hunt for sunken treasure, strange patterns are drawn in the sand on the ocean floor. It’s so lonesome and dark in that place. Nothing but trouble.”

“But you can breathe underwater?”

“Oh my, no... I’m not myself in these dreams. Sometimes I’m a ball of light, but mostly I’m just... I don’t know... I guess a skinny walrus.”

“You’re a walrus?” Derek is impressed.

“Yes,” Helen says definitively. “I’ve seen your mother swimming around down there. She’s a great white shark—but I am the walrus.”

“I thought John Lennon was the walrus,” says Gordon.

“Who?”

“You know, that guy from The Beatles who got shot to death two years ago in front of that famous apartment building in New York. The Dakota, it’s called. It’s the same place where they shot *Rosemary’s Baby*.”

“Someone’s baby was shot there, too? That’s terrible!”

“No, *Rosemary’s Baby* is a movie about a woman who gets drugged by Upper West Side devil-worshippers. They make her have sex with Satan while she’s wasted so the Antichrist can be born. Mia Farrow played the Antichrist’s mom. I’m sure you know who *she* is. She used to be married to Frank Sinatra.”

“I saw Frank Sinatra in Las Vegas once when he didn’t have his toupee on,” Helen says. “He was getting a bucket of ice from the

machine down the hall. There he was, right in front of me, bald as a vulture—only the top of his head was covered with sticky blue bits of goo. He put his finger to his lips and whispered, ‘Shhh! Don’t tell anyone!’ He had Mafia connections, you know... that’s how he got the part in *From Here to Eternity*... so I promised him I wouldn’t say a word. Then I watched him turn into a lizard and skitter away to his room.”

“Are you sure you didn’t just dream that, Grandma?”

“Maybe that last part. I can’t say for certain.”

“I saw a lizard,” says Derek. “A bluebelly. Its tail was broke off.”

“There are lizards everywhere—especially in government,” Derek’s grandmother informs him with a conspiratorial nod.

“Anyway, getting back to John Lennon...” says Gordon, “thirteen years before he was assassinated, he wrote a song called ‘I Am the Walrus.’ Derek even knows some of the words to it, I’ll bet.”

“I do?” Derek kicks the table’s center post with his cowboy boots to express his skepticism.

“Sure... I play it on the stereo all the time.” Gordon sings, “*I am he as you are he—*”

“—*as you are me and we are all together!*” Derek claps his hands in recognition and skips ahead to the part about the pornographic priestess and the yellow matter custard dripping from a dead dog’s eye. He knows at least half of the lyrics. It’s his favorite song after “Werewolves of London.”

“Good! That’s so good!” Helen cheers. She taps her spoon against her wineglass, making it ring. Then, getting wistful, she says, “It seems such a shame to kill a talented songwriter like that.”

“I know,” Gordon says. “But here’s the weird part. Or actually, a bunch of weird parts.... When The Beatles were recording ‘I Am the Walrus’ in the studio with George Martin, they decided to add a live radio broadcast from the BBC right off the air into the mix. It was kind of in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp and his found objects—you know, where Duchamp signed his name to a urinal or a bottle washing rack and then put it in a gallery and called it art. Or maybe they were more inspired by John Cage—who knows? Anyway, the BBC was broadcasting a live performance of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* at the time

and the part they recorded four minutes into the song has a line in it that goes: ‘O, Untimely Death!’”

“And this John Lennon’s death was certainly untimely,” Helen says, getting it.

“Right. Then a year after ‘I Am the Walrus’ when The Beatles were working on *The White Album*, John Lennon wrote a song called ‘Happiness is a Warm Gun.’ He said the title came from a headline he saw on a gun magazine that came out just a few months after Robert Kennedy was assassinated—but maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe he knew somehow that he would be assassinated, too.” It was D.H. who had first voiced most of these observations during their high school lunch hours; Gordon later confirmed their veracity with his own research.

“So this John Lennon writes a song about people loving their guns and then later he gets killed by one,” Helen says, summing up.

“Right. This pudgy, stressed-out, born-again Christian loser named Mark David Chapman shot him. There’s a theory that Chapman was a brainwashed assassin and his favorite book, *The Catcher in the Rye*, was the post-hypnotic triggering mechanism that caused him to kill his CIA-selected target. Just like the Queen of Diamonds from a deck of cards was the triggering mechanism for the brainwashed assassins in that movie, *The Manchurian Candidate*. Richard Condon’s book, which inspired the movie, was based on a real CIA program for creating mind-controlled assassins called Project BLUEBIRD, which later became known as MKULTRA. And you might notice that Mark Chapman and Manchurian Candidate have the same initials.”

“I saw that movie!” Helen says. “Frank Sinatra starred in it. He was so dreamy. But he was even better in a movie called *Suddenly*. In that one he played a madman who was looking to kill the President of the United States with a sniper’s rifle, and let me tell you, he was *quite* convincing.”

“See? There are wheels within wheels... the same characters keep popping up. Robert Kennedy was supposedly going on dates with Mia Farrow around the time she was working on *Rosemary’s Baby*, while she was still married to Sinatra. Some people even say Kennedy was the reason Sinatra filed for divorce. And John Frankenheimer, the director of *The Manchurian Candidate*, was a media consultant to JFK during his

election campaigns and a close friend of Robert Kennedy. In fact, it was Frankenheimer who drove Robert Kennedy to the Ambassador Hotel on the night he was assassinated. A lot of people think the shooter, Sirhan Sirhan, was in a hypnotic trance that night. Sirhan claimed he couldn't remember anything at all about the shooting when he stood trial later. Plus, powder burns around the bullet wound behind Kennedy's right ear showed that he'd been shot from behind from no more than two or three inches away, at an almost vertical trajectory, even though all the witnesses say Sirhan was in front of him the whole time and never closer than a few feet. The L.A. County Coroner, Thomas Noguchi, lost his job for pointing that out.... It makes you think someone closer to Kennedy—like his bodyguard—actually fired the shot that killed him. And in fact, when Kennedy went down, he yanked off the clip-on tie of the CIA-contracted security guard that was standing right where Noguchi said the shot must've gone off. In the crime scene photos you can see the tie on the floor next to Kennedy's hand. *Thane Eugene Cesar*—that was the guard's name, I'm pretty sure.... He's still walking around, free as a bird."

"His brother was killed that way, too. So tragic." Helen wipes a tear from her eye as she says, "What a world, what world...."

"Yeah, and you just know Lee Harvey Oswald was a patsy. That's why Jack Ruby shot him before he could go to trial. And did the Warren Commission really expect us to buy that Magic Bullet theory? Wasn't it Hitler who said, 'The bigger the lie, the more likely people are to believe it?'"

"If it wasn't Oz and his Ruby slippers, then who do you think did it?"

"I don't think we'll ever know..." Gordon says, ignoring the loopy *Wizard of Oz* reference. "Maybe it doesn't even matter. There are so many theories at this point that even if we were told the truth, we'd have a hard time believing it. The Rolling Stones have a song called 'Sympathy for the Devil' that has a line in it that goes: 'I shouted out, 'Who killed the Kennedys?' when after all, it was you and me.' If you think about it in terms of the collective unconscious, that makes about as much sense as anything."

"*I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together,*" Derek croons through his lizardfishmonster mask.

“Do you really think both of those boys slept with Marilyn Monroe?” Helen asks Gordon, on the verge of weeping. “The press can say such hateful things. But if it’s true, then her death is what started this whole ball of beeswax, if you ask me.”

“I don’t really know...” Gordon admits. “They were horny guys, that’s for sure. Some people think the Kennedys had her killed because she knew too much—which would make their own assassinations sort of karmic retribution. Marilyn supposedly had a red diary full of all sorts of stuff JFK and his brother had told her while they were sleeping with her. And there were rumors, after they broke things off, that she was so heartbroken and pissed-off that she was threatening to hold a press conference and spill all their secrets. A CIA wiretap supposedly overheard her telling her friends about Russian missile sites in Cuba and a secret trip that JFK took to a U.S. Air Force base, where he saw wreckage from a crashed flying saucer and the bodies of dead aliens. But then there’s another theory that the mob murdered Marilyn to get back at the Kennedys for turning on them. And, of course, she also might’ve just plain old committed suicide, or died from a drug overdose. She wasn’t supposed to be very happy.”

“I’ll say. Beauty, in the long run, always leads to disappointment. I know that much from personal experience. Oh shucks, excuse me....” Helen uses a paper napkin to loudly blow her nose.

“Some people say the whole peace and love, spiritual and sexual revolution of the sixties died at Altamont when the Stones played ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ just before the Hells Angels stabbed that guy in the audience,” Gordon says, backtracking a little, “but I think that’s just media manipulation. First off, I met a bunch of the Hells Angels when I was camping at Dinkey Creek, and they didn’t seem like the kind of guys who would stab someone to death unless they had a real good reason for it. I’ll bet that guy pulled a gun or something first. Second, there’s a better argument that what really turned uptight white people against the whole hippie movement was the Manson Family and the media frenzy surrounding their trial for the Tate-LaBianca murders.”

“They were in on this mess, too?” Helen’s tastefully painted-on eyebrows arc like divining rods from behind her napkin.

“Charles Manson claimed The Beatles were sending him secret, coded messages in their songs about guns and revolution on *The White Album*. He thought there’d be a huge race war between blacks and whites called ‘Helter Skelter’—which was the title of another song written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney—mostly Paul, I think.... By killing a bunch of rich white people, Manson hoped to get the race war started by laying the blame for the murders on the Black Panthers. The people he sent to do the killing even wrote HEALTER SKELTER in blood on the refrigerator door at the LaBianca house after they slaughtered everyone.”

“How horrible,” Helen says. “Imagine what it took to clean that up.”

“That’s not the worst of it. At the Tate house they killed five people, including Sharon Tate, who was married to the director, Roman Polanski. She was eight months pregnant with their first child. The killers said they were planning to cut the baby out of her and perform some kind of ritual with it, or roast it on a stick, but they ran out of time. Some people make a big deal out of the fact that Polanski, who was in London during the murders, had just had a huge hit with his latest movie, *Rosemary’s Baby*.”

“Oh my goodness, there’s that baby again!” says Helen.

“I know.... There’s a weird sort of dream-logic to all this: *Rosemary’s Baby*, Robert Kennedy, Mia Farrow, Frank Sinatra, the Manson Family, *The Manchurian Candidate*, John Lennon, JFK—they’re all interconnected somehow. Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate were guests at a small dinner party honoring Robert Kennedy at John Frankenheimer’s house earlier on the same night that he was assassinated. The actress who played the mind-controlling mom in *The Manchurian Candidate*, Angela Lansbury, gave a note to her screwed-up teenaged daughter, Didi, so she could hang out with the Manson Family without being picked up as a runaway. And the producer of *Rosemary’s Baby*, Robert Evans, was a close personal friend of Henry Kissinger—who was, of course, Nixon’s main man. Nixon may’ve lost the 1960 election to JFK, but he was a shoe-in for President in 1968 after Robert Kennedy was taken out of the race. This stuff just goes on and on.... It’s all so crazy and creepy that it freaks me out just thinking

about it. The assassination of Martin Luther King is probably mixed-up in there, too—I just haven't figured out how yet."

"Two Kennedys and a King," Helen says. "KKK. You know what that means."

"You think the Ku Klux Klan had something to do with this?"

"I don't know what I think. But that's what you're looking for, isn't it? Some group in the shadows, masterminding the conspiracy...."

"Yeah, but not a bunch of dumb rednecks wearing bed sheets."

"I just thought with the whole race thing... oh, don't bother." Helen's voice goes up a few notches in tone. "You're right," she says, speaking much faster than usual. "They're much too simple to pull off such a stunt. This is sorcery, a collective turning from the spirit's light. The Dark Brotherhood."

"The dark what?"

"Did I just say something?" Helen's voice is back to normal. She blinks her eyes, looking around as if she's lost.

"You were saying something about a Dark Brotherhood," Gordon reminds her. He's worried that she may have just had a stroke. Or maybe she was channeling wisdom from a higher source.

"Was I? Just now? I don't have the faintest recollection...." Helen gets up to clear away the dishes. *Her motor skills seem just fine*, Gordon observes with relief.

"Well!" she says, trying to hide her nervousness, "I sure do enjoy our little dinner conversations. Derek, did you get enough to eat?"

"Yeah. I'm so full I might have to go barf," Derek says with his usual candor.

"Gordon?"

"It was great. Thanks...." Gordon's mind is churning. He feels like he's on the threshold of a revelation, but he just can't get over the hump. His grandmother (or the spirit she was channeling) seems to have hinted at some unspeakable force toying with world history, using the same small group of pawns in a twisted metaphysical game. Maybe it's like a five-dimensional Gnostic chess match—something too complicated to comprehend all at once. He's reminded of the string of absurd coincidences between the assassinations of Lincoln and JFK.

He makes a mental note to look up both assassinations in his encyclopedia when he gets home.¹

“Can I help with the dishes?” Gordon asks his grandmother, thinking some mindless physical labor might help clear his head.

“No, you boys just run along,” Helen says. “It’s still Halloween. Go have some fun. Scare yourselves silly.”

“Okay then. I guess we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“All Saints’ Day,” Helen reminds him.

“Bye, Grandma!” Derek shouts, a lizardfishmonster blur streaking like a comet toward the door.



Outside, across the street at the Nyquist’s house, Mr. Nyquist stands in the dim yellow light of his doorway shaking with early-stage Parkinson’s disease as he hands out candy to a glow-in-the-dark skeleton, two ghosts, a witch, a rubber-faced Ronald Reagan, and a Catholic bishop wearing red satin vestments. A tall mitre sits on the bishop’s head like a stylized lobster claw with the Number of the Beast, **666**, painted in gold leaf at its center. As Gordon and Derek get closer, they see a coagulation of bloody drool glistening on the bishop’s chin and vampire fangs descending past his lower lip. It’s an odd sight for Kingsburg, a town that’s never been very big on anti-Catholic sentiment. Although most of the Swedes are Protestants, they don’t go around denigrating other faiths.

¹ Here’s what he’ll find: Abraham Lincoln was elected President in 1860. John F. Kennedy was elected President 100 years later, in 1960. They were the only two Presidents to print and issue U.S. government currency, in defiance of international bankers and the Federal Reserve. Both were shot in the head on a Friday, while sitting next to their wives. Kennedy was traveling in a Ford Lincoln and Lincoln was shot in Ford’s Theatre. Southerners assassinated both Presidents and Southerners also succeeded them. Both successors were named Johnson. Andrew Johnson was born in 1808 and Lyndon Johnson was born 100 years later, in 1908. Both assassins were known by their three names and each full name had fifteen letters. John Wilkes Booth ran from the theater and was captured in a warehouse, while Lee Harvey Oswald ran from the warehouse and was captured in a theater. And in the end, both assassins were assassinated before their trials.

It makes Gordon wonder if Halloween is one of those holidays (“Holy Days”), like Easter and Christmas, co-opted by the Christian calendar from more ancient pagan celebrations. A slaphappy magic rabbit didn’t show up at Jesus’ crucifixion to hand out Easter eggs, after all. The hare and the egg are hijacked symbols from the Norse goddess, Ostara, or the Saxon fertility goddess, Eostre, or maybe the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar... Gordon can’t remember which is which, but he knows for sure that worshippers of one of those goddesses or the other practiced taurobolia—the ritual sacrifice of a divine bull, whose blood magically purified and revived the earth (along with baptizing some of the participants). He’s also fairly certain the myth of Cybele and Attis is mixed up in there somehow, too.

But where did Halloween come from? Who started this weird tradition of dressing up children in scary costumes and having them run around at night banging on doors and shouting, “Trick or Treat!”? Did it have its roots in the Celtic harvest festival, *Sambain*? Britain’s Lord of Misrule? The Boy Scouts? The Druids? Whatever the truth is, it’s long since dissipated into opinions—which vary. It’s become as impossible to know as who killed JFK.

The yellow light across the street blinks out as Mr. Nyquist closes his door. The vampire bishop whoops and runs over to do a little war dance in Mr. Nyquist’s ivy bed—no doubt trampling ancient, hidden dog turds in the process—then he hikes up his red satin robes and trots off to the next house for more bounty. Gordon wonders, *Did the fall of the Roman Empire really happen, or do the Vatican and the Mafia still pretty much control everything?* It’s a paranoid thought for paranoid times, with the assassination attempts on President Reagan and Pope John Paul II still so recent.

On the walk home with Derek, Gordon’s thoughts start to swirl. *It doesn’t seem fair*, he thinks to himself. *Why do liberal, progressive leaders like the Kennedys, John Lennon, and Martin Luther King get assassinated, while the conservative old dinosaurs like Ronald Reagan and the Pope survive the attempts on their lives? And who stood to benefit if Reagan had been assassinated, anyway? The same dark cabal that went after the Kennedys couldn’t want Reagan out of the way—Reagan was their guy!—unless they wanted Vice President Bush in his place. George H.W. Bush, former director of the CIA, the man who kept a lid on the CIA’s misdeeds in the messy aftermath of Watergate and protected CIA secrets*

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

from the House Sub-Committee on Assassinations; a member of Yale's Skull and Bones society, a 33rd degree Mason, and a rumored descendant of Vlad II Dracul—father of the 15th-century Transylvanian warlord, Vlad IV Dracula, who inspired Bram Stoker's famous book. Just how big a role did Bush play in all this?

As these paranoid associations flit through Gordon's mind, it occurs to him that he might need to step back a little and broaden his perspective. Maybe the assassinations were best looked at in terms of myth. A thousand years in the future, JFK and Jackie O. might have the same resonance in the collective consciousness of Americans as Cybele and Attis did for the ancient Greeks. The idea isn't so far-fetched.... After all, Arthurian legend was invoked early in the game, when Kennedy's reign in the White House was compared to Camelot. It would follow that the assassination, on a mythological level, reenacted the killing of the king. The relatively new medium of television made sure that all of the country's citizens were given the opportunity to see their courageous leader's brains blown out in broad daylight. What a huge, negative impact that must have had on the dreaming psyche of the USA.

No one is safe, not even the President.... That was the subconscious message imprinted on the mind of every American on the day JFK died. It was hammered home again with the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and John Lennon. It was a message that instilled a panicky sense of helplessness and despair, a sense that the world is rigged and malevolent powerbrokers rule from the shadows. Maybe it was intended that way. Maybe sending that message was the underlying motive for every one of the assassinations in the first place.

Gordon remembers a quote from William Carlos Williams that he wrote down in one of his notebooks: *"America is a pathetic place where something stupefying must always happen for fear we wake up."* American politics and American culture interact in an endless feedback loop that creates and amplifies a passivity-inducing sense of dread. In a flash, Gordon sees how it all might work:

It starts with an evil intent—the CIA's secret program to create mind-controlled assassins, for instance. Somewhere, somehow, the sensitive psychic antenna of an artist picks up on that intent and

broadcasts it as a warning to the rest of us—as art. In this case it would be Richard Condon’s book, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and the subsequent movie directed by John Frankenheimer. Sometimes we heed the warning and catastrophe is averted, but by focusing so many minds on the evil intent, the original malefactors are often emboldened and, ironically, their intent becomes more likely to enter reality. Thus, Sirhan Sirhan (and perhaps an accomplice) assassinates Robert Kennedy. Then the media picks up on the event and amplifies it, creating ripple effects of fear and dread throughout the culture. The Beatles record *The White Album* and Charles Manson thinks there are messages in it just for him. Manson, in turn, hatches his own evil intent to start a race war by killing rich white people, specifically Sharon Tate. That intent then collides with the evil intent to birth an Antichrist in June of 1966 (6/66), which we were warned about by Ira Levin’s book, *Rosemary’s Baby*, and the Roman Polanski movie of the same name. Then all hell breaks loose in the media frenzy surrounding the Manson murders, finishing off the nascent spiritual revolution of the sixties. Peace, love, and understanding have to take a backseat when the American public is collectively shitting its pants in terror. In the end, the guys in the CIA—whose task is to wage psychic warfare on the nation’s citizens, keeping everyone in their place via artificially-created fears (while the advertising world does the rest, enslaving everyone to material obsessions via artificially-created desires), guys in that particular, ultra-secret hidden branch of the CIA, anyway—wind up saying, “Wow, that worked pretty good. What can we do next?”

And then Gordon thinks, *Hey, wait a minute... I was born in June of 1966.*

While it’s perversely flattering, for a second, to think that he might be the spawn of Satan, Gordon quickly realizes how unlikely it would be for the Antichrist to incarnate in the body of a skinny, asthmatic narcoleptic. The Antichrist, if he ever shows up, will probably look a lot more like Arnold Schwarzenegger, the star of *Conan the Barbarian*, who answered the question, “What is best in life?” by replying, “To crush your enemies! To see them driven before you and to hear the lamentations of the women.” Words to live by, apparently, if you’re a pumped-up barbarian or on the CIA’s secret payroll. Maybe Schwarzenegger will follow Ronald Reagan into politics someday

(*Arnold* is an anagram of *Ronald*, Gordon's pattern-seeking brain can't help but notice...).

"Let's listen to 'I Am the Walrus' again," Derek suggests as they head up the sidewalk toward home.

Another group of trick-or-treaters passes them as Gordon is reaching for his keys to the front door. Older kids this time. There's a cannibal clown with a wig of yellow condoms and a splintered bone fragment through his bulbous red nose; a slatternly witch in black fishnet stockings; a baggy-suited Superman in a frayed dimestore cape; a blood-smeared Indian squaw; and a silent, overfed guy in a tuxedo with a blank white hockey goalie's mask on his face, in homage to the bogeyman from the *Friday the 13th* movies. Gordon is reminded that he should be putting on his own costume for the Halloween party Jimmy is hosting at his uncle's house later that night (Uncle Lloyd is away on a business trip and unwisely left Jimmy in charge of watering the plants). Then he notices someone else. A tall, slightly out-of-focus someone wearing a toxic green bunny suit and hefting around a sparkling silver sledgehammer. The sight gives Gordon chills. Suddenly, he feels like he's losing his grip on reality. Because the bunny is speaking to him via telepathy, and what it's saying to him is:

"You still don't remember all that you know, but you're getting closer. Prepare yourself for anamnesis."

Gordon is about to ask the bunny to define the term *anamnesis*, but in a blink it disappears. His brain finds the concept of bunny-induced telepathy so appallingly strange that his neural filters refuse to admit it to conscious memory—so the whole episode is shuffled off to Gordon's unconscious, for later recall in his dreams. In his waking mind, it's as if he never saw the bunny at all.

Derek, however, took in everything. But the bunny made him promise not to talk about it.



Yeah, I know... I'm quite the spunky little fucker at the age of three. It's kind of obnoxious. But you should hear my singing voice—it's not half-bad. And that Tijuana Lizardfishmonster get-up was goddam prescient, as you'll soon discover. I could tell that even Gordon's daimon was impressed.

Anamnesis, in case you were wondering, is a Greek word that means, literally, “loss of forgetfulness.” It’s sort of the opposite of amnesia. Plato used the term when he talked about how all learning is really a form of remembering, a way of recalling the eternal spiritual truths we knew just before our souls took the plunge and incarnated in these lame, knuckle-headed human bodies again. You can especially see anamnesis in action with kids around preschool age, when they start picking up language and facts so fast that it seems like there’s no way they could be taking everything in for the first time—they must be remembering things they already knew somehow. And I’m not just talking about my own amazingly precocious, erudite, and quick-witted three-year-old self here. Just about any snot-nosed brat my age does the same.

But anamnesis can go even further, if you’re lucky.... It can help you untangle illusion from reality and make you aware of your true divine nature. It can bestow grace, wisdom, and salvation. But only if you’re ready for it. Anamnesis arrives on a need-to-know basis.

Here’s another thing you should know about anamnesis: Some of the spiritual truths it reveals about life on this planet aren’t very pretty. Starting with the Big One: that we volunteered to descend into this prison world and lock ourselves into a linear-proceeding space-time matrix with hardly any memories of our spiritual identities—all just so human suffering could be inflicted on us.

Now why the hell would we do that? What are we, masochists?

Well, maybe yes, maybe no.... Like I’ve said before, there are lessons our souls need to learn from our time spent on Earth, lessons we can’t seem to learn anywhere else. So in a way, we’re being educated and enslaved all at once. But if our souls are making progress, we’ll also learn to break free from false, limiting realities. We’ll learn to say “fuck off” to tyranny. One particularly good spur toward doing that is suffering:

“What can one say in favor of the suffering of little creatures in this world?” Philip K. Dick wrote before the end of his wild, traumatized life (Five marriages! Drug addiction! Grinding sci-fi poverty!) “Nothing. Nothing, except that it will by its nature trigger off revolt or disobedience—which will in turn lead to an abolition of this world and a return to the Godhead.”

If you want my opinion, the abolition of this world won’t be happening anytime soon, so don’t get your hopes up. Philip K. Dick experienced his own

personal abolition after a series of strokes and a heart attack in March of 1982. He never got to see the theatrical release of Blade Runner—the movie made from his novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?—which came out later that same year. (Gordon and his buddies saw it and thought it was one of the best movies ever, even with the dopey voice-over narration.) Life was just about to get good for Phil, so he died. Typical.

He was only fifty-three. During his abbreviated life span, Phil wrote over fifty volumes of novels and stories. By doing all that writing (and a ton of reading), he modified the structure and contents of his own mind so that new perceptions of an increasingly complex mystical order could flow through it: anamnesis of eternal truths, or Plato's Forms. If you're like me (a space- and time-transcendent soul fresh from the Other Side, lightly tethered to a fetus waiting to be born), this will start you thinking about memes—a word coined by Richard Dawkins to refer to bits of culture, or ideas, that reproduce and compete just like genes. Or maybe you'll start thinking about William Burroughs' language as a virus theory as it relates to the Logos doctrine regarding Christ—Logos being defined by Phil as “both that which thought, and the thing which it thought: thinker and thought together.” But it's too easy to get lost there, obviously—so let's just keep it simple by saying that on February 20th, 1974, Phil experienced what he described as a theophany, “an in-breaking of God, an in-breaking which amounts to an invasion of our world....”

“Lurking, the true God literally ambushes reality and us as well,” Phil wrote in his novel, VALIS (an acronym for Vast Active Living Intelligence System), which tried to make sense of the whole business. “God, in very truth, attacks and injures us, in his role as antidote. As Fat can testify to,” (Horselover Fat, Phil's insane, split-off alter-ego in the book), “it is a scary experience to be bushwhacked by the Living God. Hence, we say the true God is in the habit of concealing himself...”

—which sounds just like how a daimon operates, now doesn't it?

Anyway, whether it resulted from a daimon or the True God or the inexplicable workings of the Logos, we're talking Gnosis with a capital G here. What happened was this: Phil was at home moping around after having two impacted wisdom teeth pulled. His dentist had shot him full of sodium pentathol (truth serum) and its effects were just wearing off when a girl from the local drugstore showed up at his door to deliver some prescription painkillers. Phil found himself entranced by the gleaming gold fish pendant

on the delivery girl's necklace. He asked her *what it was* and she said it was a sign worn by the early Christians (the vesica piscis). In an instant, Phil saw "fading into view the black prison-like contours of hateful Rome" circa 50 AD, where he and the girl were secret Christians.

"We lived in fear of detection by the Romans," Phil wrote of the experience later. "We had to communicate with cryptic signs. She had just told me all this, and it was true. ... But, of much more importance, I remembered Jesus, who had just recently been with us, and had gone temporarily away, and would very soon return. My emotion was one of joy. We were secretly preparing to welcome Him back. It would not be long. And the Romans did not know. They thought He was dead, forever dead. That was our great secret, our joyous knowledge. Despite all appearances, Christ was going to return, and our delight and anticipation was boundless."

I guess you could write all this off as a weird drug hallucination. Or you might hypothesize that our buddy Phil was experiencing a psychotic breakdown. Whatever it was, the visions and revelations continued over the next several weeks—and if anything, they got even freakier. Phil started to believe he was living two overlapping lives: one as himself and the other as a guy named Thomas, a Gnostic Christian who lived during the first-century under the shadow of the Roman Empire. Phil also discovered he could speak in Koiné Greek, an ancient language that was used to write the New Testament. And one day while he was lying around listening to KNX-FM on his little bedside radio, Phil heard the lyrics of 'Strawberry Fields Forever' change into the prophetic warning: "Your son has an undiagnosed right inguinal hernia. The hydrocele has burst, and it has descended into the scrotal sac. He requires immediate attention, or will soon die."

("Inguinal Hernia Forever...." Go ahead—just try to imagine John Lennon carrying a tune to that.)

Phil told his wife, Tessa, to make an immediate doctor's appointment for their ten-month-old son, Christopher. The doctor confirmed that the warning was essentially true (Christopher had a life-threatening hernia and two swelling hydroceles—but neither of them had burst). Surgery was scheduled. The hernia was repaired and the hydroceles were excised.

Theophany, drug-fueled hallucinations, or psychosis—whatever you ascribe it to, Christopher's life was saved.

After the visions stopped, or at least slowed down some, Phil spent the remaining years of his life trying to figure out what the hell, exactly, had

happened to him. He tried to assimilate the experience, and make sense of it, using the vocabulary and understanding he'd built up through all his years of reading and writing. Phil wrote everything down in a journal that he called his Exegesis, which ran to something like 8,000 pages—over a million words. As Phil described the process in VALIS: "Fat must have come up with more theories than there are stars in the universe. Every day he developed a new one, more cunning, more exciting and more fucked." One theme that Phil kept coming around to in the Exegesis was that there must be "a mysterious Holy Spirit which has an exact and intimate relation to Christ, which can indwell in human minds, guide and inform them, and even express itself through those humans, even without their awareness."

Whether he realized it or not, Phil was writing about his own daimon.

The third-century Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus spoke of daimons as being "both within us and yet transcendent"—meaning they can show up inside our heads (in our dreams and interior voices of inspiration), and outside our heads (as apparitions, etheric Indian shamans, and Phildickian visions). Carl Jung, who referred to his own daimon as Philemon, elaborated on those two paths for daimonic manifestation in his commentary on the Bardo Thöдол—or as it's known in the West, The Tibetan Book of the Dead:

"Not only the 'wrathful' but also the 'peaceful' deities are conceived as sangsâric projections of the human psyche, an idea that seems all too obvious to the enlightened European, because it reminds him of his own banal simplifications. But though the European can easily explain away these deities as projections, he would be quite incapable of positing them at the same time as real. The Bardo Thöдол can do that.... The ever-present, unspoken assumption of the Bardo Thöдол is the antinominal character of all metaphysical assertions, and also the idea of the qualitative difference of the various levels of consciousness and of the metaphysical realities conditioned by them. The background of this unusual book is not the niggardly European 'either-or' but a magnificently affirmative 'both-and'."

Try thinking of the Bardo as analogous to the light spectrum. We only see the visible light that makes up the colors of the rainbow, but that doesn't mean the infrared and ultraviolet edges of the spectrum don't exist. We just can't see them. The Bardo is sort of like that. It's all around us—we're actually swimming in it—but most of us can't see it (cats see more of it, which is why they jump at things when we think there's nothing there). The

Bardo includes the physical realm we know on Earth, but that's just one level—like one station broadcasting at a specific frequency on the radio (“You’re tuned to 90.3, Earth Realm, on your Bardo dial...”). When we tune in to a new station the old one doesn’t disappear, right? It’s still broadcasting; we’re just not listening to it anymore. Occasionally, we’ll hear a fuzzy hint of another station, as static, if the station frequencies are set too close together. Maybe that’s what happened to Phil on February 20th, 1974. He experienced some metaphysical reality static. Bardo bleed-over.

Phil arrived at a similar conclusion when he wrote that ‘hallucinations, whether induced by psychosis, hypnosis, drugs, toxins, etc., may be merely quantitatively different from what we see, not qualitatively so.’ Maybe hallucinations are just other aspects of metaphysical reality that our brain’s neural filters are keeping out, so we can go on with our everyday consensus reality convictions on “the mundane plane,” as Mircea Eliade described it. The human brain’s hundred billion neurons must be sensitive to all kinds of things outside the normal range of our five senses. Maybe even the act of thinking can generate thought patterns in subtle energy fields that can be picked up by other brains and translated back into the same thoughts—again, like a radio signal. The renowned biologist Rupert Sheldrake called this theory Morphic Resonance.

Who knows? If that’s how it all works, as Phil found out, it’s almost impossible to prove. If seeing certain aspects of metaphysical reality is intrinsically linked to the level of a person’s consciousness, then that metaphysical reality can’t be fully comprehended by others until their own level of consciousness has changed.

Another recurring theme in Phil’s Exegesis was that the Roman Empire never really ended. Look at Entry 29, for example (published in the appendix of VALIS): “We did not fall because of moral error; we fell because of an intellectual error: that of taking the phenomenal world as real. Therefore we are morally innocent. It is the Empire in its various disguised polyforms which tells us we have sinned. ‘The Empire never ended.’”

You want my take? What Phil is saying there is basically true, but it goes much deeper. The Empire is just one of the many faces of the Dark Brotherhood, and they’ve been around since the very beginnings of this planet. The Dark Brotherhood is made up of the Archons—the demonic punishers and exploiters of mankind—and those who’ve joined their cause over the course of human history.

The Archons never left us.

Think of the Archons as spiritual challengers from the lower realms of the Bardo, demigods who work behind the scenes to advance the agenda of the Dark Brotherhood—a sort of world-encompassing metaphysical Mafia that shows nothing but contempt for human laws. The Dark Brotherhood can be recognized by its steadfast and stealthy opposition to the natural evolution of liberation and enlightenment for all of humanity. They're like the greedy CEOs of corrupt, polluting global corporations. In fact, they are—among other things—the greedy CEOs of corrupt, polluting global corporations. They want all the power in the world, and they want it for their own selfish, antisocial ends. ("More tax cuts for the filthy rich, anyone?...") They're the exemplars of Lord Acton's dictum, coined after the First Vatican Council's declaration of papal infallibility: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The typical human representative of the Dark Brotherhood is an incredibly vain, arrogant, psychopathic personality who has cultivated his lower soul, or False Self, over many lifetimes with no time in-between spent on the Other Side (for him it's just one damned incarnation after the other...). In the process, he's cut himself off from his higher soul—and its chances to merge with spirit—in exchange for the Dark Brotherhood's promise of temporal wealth and power. This is what we mean when we say someone has sold their soul to the devil. They've really just clipped their soul's wings by putting it in service to the Archons.

Most of the human Dark Brothers are mere puppets, completely unaware of the Archons pulling their strings. Their naked greed—their lying, cheating, hoarding, crassly manipulative ways—puts them in harmonic vibration with the Bardo's lower levels; they become almost mechanical, easily susceptible to morphic resonance from the superior group-mind of the Archons. Often, without even realizing it, these humans (who can be Presidents and kings) act on thoughts and compulsions that aren't their own.

Okay, so maybe on the surface all this sounds too weird and impossible to be true, but check with your intuition—you've known something like this has been happening all along. It explains the demonic nightmare-logic and anti-evolutionary tendencies in the flow of human history. If all the progressive and regressive currents in world events constitute the moves in a five-dimensional Gnostic chess game, as Gordon intuited, then the True God must be on one side and the Dark Brotherhood on the other:

"Your reality move..." says the True God.

"We'll blow Kennedy's brains out in Dealey Plaza," says the Dark Brotherhood.

"Fuck! That's the same move you pulled on me with Lincoln!" says the True God. "I can't believe I fell for that again!"

"All the signs were right there in front of you," sneers the Dark Brotherhood. "You should've seen it coming when we went after Marilyn.... Putz."

It's in the inherent nature of the Dark Brotherhood to sow fear and hatred among the world's people. They feed on it. (More about that later....) But there are at least some rules to this game that the True God and the Dark Brotherhood are playing. One of those rules is called the Law of Free Will. Basically, what that means is that the Archons or the True God or your personal daimon are not allowed to do certain things that would upset your life and reality unless you give them permission first. They can't just come right out and ask you, because even the act of revealing themselves would constitute a violation of your free will. So instead, they have to do a lot of beating around the bush.

The direct approach wouldn't work too well for the Archons, anyway ("Hey, um, would it be okay if we torch your house, rape your dog, and paralyze you from, let's say, your nipples on down? Just wondering.... Oh, and by the way, we plan on dismantling the Social Security system and privatizing schools so they can be run by our highly trained, crack teams of pedophiles and book-burning sadists. You don't mind, do you?"). With the direct approach out, what the Archons do instead is provide you with a few synchronistic hints and nudges and plenty of meaning-laden symbols to show you how the deal will go down. That's supposed to be fair—and it would be, if people knew about the Law of Free Will and could study Archon symbolism in advance. But the sad fact is that most people have been media-hypnotized into complacency (the Dark Brotherhood pretty much owns Hollywood and all the major news providers), so instead of heeding the warnings, they just act like a bunch of cows and do nothing. Their free will is then considered relinquished and the Archons are free to do their dirt.

You want examples? Sometimes something as simple as a name can give the game away. Consider the names of some of those who've drawn on the collective goodwill of Christians and Americans, and then used that collective energy toward regressive ends: Jerry Falwell (Fall Well), Jimmy Swaggart

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(Swagger + Braggart), *Cardinal Ratzinger* (Rat Zinger), *Newt Gingrich* (I mean, come on... who names their kid Newt?!). Need more examples? For beating around the bush, you can't beat the ambushings of the Bush family.

Oh, and don't forget Arnold Schwarzenegger....

CASUALTY BENEFITS

Hideous stops by Gordon's house around nine o'clock to pick him up for the party at Jimmy's uncle's house. Skip, D.H., and Twinker are already out in the truck. Gordon has honored Derek's Halloween wish by transforming himself into a red-furred werewolf wearing striped pants, a skinny tie, and a mod black velvet jacket from London that he picked up for ten dollars at a Fresno flea market. His hair is perfect.

Skip steps out of the truck wearing freakishly tall Flagg Brother platform boots. He greets Gordon as a drunken Frankenstein—misshapen green brow, bolts through his neck, and a bottle of Jägermeister clenched in his veiny fist. He pours a shot directly into Gordon's upturned mouth with an encouraging grunt, then climbs back into the cab next to Twinker, who has made herself up as Frankenstein's bride. She's wrapped in yards of white taffeta and her hair is teased into a huge beehive with white poster paint lightning bolts running up the sides. Gordon finds it a tight squeeze getting in because D.H. is swathed in an enormous raccoon fur coat that's taking up all the free space.

"Slap me five, you jiveass pussy hound..." D.H. says in pimp-speak from under the wide brim of a purple fake-fur fedora sporting a long peacock feather. "We be gettin' muthafuckin' *down* tonight, bro. My hot-ass bitches be garglin' your werewolf jism."

"Sounds great," says Gordon. "The dog in me wouldn't mind a little Deep Throat action tonight."

"The concept of chivalry is lost on you two..." chides Twinker, pretending to be offended. "No wonder you don't have girlfriends."

“Hey, I was just alluding to Woodward and Bernstein’s confidential Watergate source,” Gordon protests. “Tonight at dinner I was talking to my grandmother about conspiracy theories and thinking how great it’d be to get the real scoop from a highly-placed insider.”

“Right!” says D.H., feigning outrage. “And I was just reciting the lyrics from a well-known Barry White song about, um... *werewolf jism*.”

“You’re both so fuckin’ classy,” Skip grumbles, putting his arm around Twinker.

“Ooh! Sorry if we’ve offended your delicate sensibilities there, Skipperella.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re above such crude talk now that you’re making sweet love to our lady friend, Twinker,” D.H. puts in. “You weren’t so damn snooty when you were hosing your mom.”

“Hey, I resent that!” Skip says. But even Twinker is laughing.

“Buncha women cum this time, yeah?” Hideous asks of no one in particular as he starts up the truck. Hideous is apparently going to the party as himself, only more so. His hair is spiked even higher than usual and he’s sporting three new silver rings pierced through his right brow—one of them oozing blood.

“Jimmy said to expect a full house. He’s got a keg of Bass Ale and about five gallons of Jamaican rum out there waiting for us,” says Skip. “Oh shit! That reminds me... we have to stop and get pineapples.”

After making a quick detour at the grocery store, they drive out to the Kings River Golf Course, where Uncle Lloyd’s estate sits at the end of the 9th hole. The golf course is where all the fabulously rich people in Kingsburg tend to build their houses, and Lloyd’s house is by far the most fabulous one of them all.

In the light of a full moon and the double row of Tiki torches in the front drive, Lloyd’s mansion looks like one of the Great Lodges built by rich industrialists and robber barons on the lakes of upstate New York. It’s all weathered cedar shingles and exposed log beams with a grand river rock entranceway and at least three rock chimneys climbing high into the starry sky. From the ivy-cloaked top floor, tall leaded glass windows cast a warm amber glow across the tennis court on the estate’s eastern side, where a group of underage zombies,

princesses, and astronauts have already gathered to chug beer and slurp slushy piña coladas.

“Ahoy, mateys!” Jimmy shouts, swinging on the carved mahogany *art-nouveau* front door. He’s dressed as a one-eyed pirate, waving a cutlass around inside the stone foyer as if he’s slashing at invisible marauders. An electronic organ solo booms, burbles, and chirps from the lamp-lit living room behind him.

“What is this shit?” D.H. asks, referring to the music. “It sounds like Lawrence Welk trying to get funky.”

“It’s a group called Mannheim Steamroller,” Jimmy says. “My uncle’s got one of those new compact disc players, but he doesn’t have that many CDs yet. This is one of the only ones.”

“Well, it sucks,” D.H. says. With a dismissive shrug of raccoon fur, he sweeps past Jimmy into the vast living room, taking no notice of the open-beam ceiling and the antique Stickley furniture. He heads straight to the stereo system. Tall Klipsch speakers are built into bird’s-eye maple bookcases flanking a 400-watt Onkyo receiver, a Bang & Olufsen linear-tracking turntable, and a high-end Nakamichi cassette deck—along with the coveted compact disc player from Sony, which isn’t even supposed to be available in the U.S. until spring. “Where did your uncle get this?” D.H. asks, pushing the Sony’s *Eject* button. The music cuts out at once.

“Lloyd had it shipped direct to him from Japan.” Jimmy says. “He’s got all kinds of weird connections from his insurance business. It’s like the Mafia, almost.”

“Did you bring any of your own music?” Gordon asks him, surveying Lloyd’s extensive collection of jazz albums.

“How ‘bout some *Ted Nugent Double Live Gonzol!*” Jimmy crouches and plays air guitar on his cutlass, grimacing like a diarrhetic rhinoceros. It’s apparent to everyone that he’s already drunk.

“Ted Nugent was lame before we even started high school,” D.H. says. “We need some *real* music to get this party started. Lucky for you, I brought along a mix tape.” He pulls a 90-minute Maxell cassette from his coat pocket and slides it into the Nakamichi deck. Nobody argues with him. D.H. has a knack for finding obscure songs that have a way of making his friends feel weirdly empowered—even heroic—just by listening to them.

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The first tune is already familiar to everyone—a Talking Heads song called “Memories Can’t Wait” off the *Fear of Music* album. Lately, D.H. has been getting into the sort of jangly, propulsive music that’s been called New Wave since about 1976. Gordon picks up the empty cassette box to take a look at the complete song list scrawled on the back in D.H.’s tiny, spidery script:

SIDE ONE:

Talking Heads, “Memories Can’t Wait”

Magazine, “A Song From Under the Floorboards”

The Psychedelic Furs, “All of This and Nothing”

Echo & The Bunnymen, “Rescue”

The Cure, “A Forest”

Joy Division, “Love Will Tear Us Apart”

New Order, “Ceremony”

Magazine, “Permafrost”

SIDE TWO:

Pere Ubu, “Not Happy”

Big Star, “Kangaroo”

Klaatu, “Little Neutrino”

Magazine, “I Want To Burn Again”

Isis Pop, “Sea of Love”

Les Veilleurs, “Ballad of a Thin Man”

Television, “Marquee Moon”

The Slog Pongs “Crushed By Crowds”

“What’s with all the Magazine songs?” Gordon asks D.H.. “And just one Bob Dylan cover? That’s so unlike you.”

“I know...” says D.H., “but my new favorite album right now is Magazine’s *Secondhand Daylight*. It’s got this great cover photo of a burnt-up human head on a pike against an institutional green background. And the songs are amazing—really dark and cynical. One reviewer even said something like, ‘Magazine is the band Albert Camus would’ve been in if Camus had a band.’”

“Sounds awesome,” says Jimmy. “Who the fuck is Albert Camus?”

It takes Gordon and D.H. a while to hip Jimmy to Albert Camus and his partners in existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. By the time they’ve finished, nine beers and three piña coladas have been drunk between the three of them and the huge Klipsch speakers are resounding with the icy, majestic synthesizers of Magazine’s “Permafrost.” A collective chill runs up their spines as the band’s lead singer, Howard Devoto, hauntingly intones:

*As the day stops dead
At the place where we’re lost
I will drug you and fuck you
On the permafrost.*

“You’re right,” Gordon says to D.H., “this is a great, *great* song.”

"It's perfect music for a first date," says D.H., bobbing his head in time with the bouncy, submarine-deep bass line. "It also goes over really swell at bar mitzvahs."

"It makes me think that Sartre guy was right when he said, 'Hell is other people,'" says Jimmy, trying to show off some of his newly acquired knowledge. He holds up an index finger, as if calling for a time out. Then he turns and casually projectile vomits into a Tang Dynasty vase decorated with a faint carving of peonies. After wiping his mouth on his poofy white pirate sleeve, Jimmy turns right around and brays, "Let's all sing!" He waves his arms about like a sloshed opera conductor as the chorus comes around again. "Everybody now! *'As the day stops dead...'*"

And that's how his Uncle Lloyd finds them, coming home early from his business trip. Beet-cheeked, squinty-eyed, morbidly obese, Lloyd walks in through his front door carrying a rumpled suit bag over his shoulder and in his right hand, a brushed aluminum Zero Halliburton suitcase. He sets the suitcase in the entryway as he looks into his living room and sees at least two-dozen shit-faced teens standing around singing a song about date rape in Antarctica. Rather than getting indignant, as any normal adult might, Lloyd just waves to Jimmy from across the crowded room and calls out:

"Hey there, pal, did you remember to water my frickin' aspidistra?"

"Uncle Lloyd!" Jimmy shouts with uninhibited glee.

"When I drove up I saw Frankenstein and his bride screwing like wild dogs on the roof of my chalet," Lloyd smirks.

"That'd be Skip and Twinker," Jimmy says. "They're goddam animals. I'll go outside and turn the hose on 'em, if you want."

"That would violate my personal ethos. I refuse to get my nuts in a twist over a case of youthful lust. I actually find it invigorating. So let 'em hump!"

"Did you hear that everybody?" Jimmy announces to the room. "Lloyd says it's okay to go up on his roof and fuck."

A collective cheer goes up from the alpha-males in the group, but not one of the girls shows a similar enthusiasm.

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“So James...” Lloyd says, moving through the crowd, “before this orgy you’re promoting gets underway, why don’t you introduce me to your friends?”

“Um, sure...” Jimmy discreetly positions himself between his uncle and the vomit-filled Tang Dynasty vase. Patting a nearby swath of raccoon fur, he says, “This is my buddy, D.H.; D.H., meet my Uncle Lloyd.”

D.H. doffs his purple pimp hat and takes a stage actor’s bow.

Lloyd asks, “And what does the D.H. stand for?”

“Doctor of Hemorrhoids,” D.H. says, improvising on the spot.

“Deboned Homunculus,” Gordon contributes.

“Ah.”

“That’s Hideous over there on the couch,” Jimmy says. From the couch, Hideous nods his spiky head. The air around him is humid with recent farts—the gastric aftermath of a protein shake loaded with B-vitamins that he rashly drank after kung-fu class.

“Hideous. How apt...” Lloyd mummurs. Touching his own eyebrow, he says, “You’re bleeding a bit there, son.”

“I know... but I not get bwud on sofa,” Hideous assures him. “You pwace is so awesome! I enjoy to be inside it vewy much.”

“And this guy here,” says Jimmy, not bothering to translate, “is my good friend, Crash.”

“Now Crash I’ve heard of,” Lloyd says, looking Gordon up and down. “I assume that moniker wasn’t bestowed on you at birth.”

“Hell no,” Gordon says, feeling a tad belligerent.

“His real name is Gordon. We just call him Crash because he crashes into stuff a lot.”

“He suffers from narcolepsy,” D.H. says, affecting a clinical demeanor.

“Oh? Is that just the quack opinion of a Doctor of Hemorrhoids, or does it have some basis in medical fact?”

“I’ll have you know, sir, I’m no quack.”

“Actually,” Jimmy says, “we started calling him Crash after he crashed Hideous’ truck into a bunch of cheap-ass Mexican garden trolls and a highly-valuable black velvet painting of a Siberian Tiger.”

“Okay, now this I have to hear....”

So Jimmy tells the story, with Gordon and D.H. filling in details:

Late last spring, Hideous had been driving Gordon, Skip, D.H., and Jimmy back from a day of ditching school up in the mountains near Dinkey Creek. Hideous was sober, as usual. Oddly, so was Gordon, owing to a particularly vicious hangover from the previous weekend that had caused him swear off alcohol for a while. Everyone else had been drinking beer and smoking pot all afternoon. Gordon and D.H. sat in back of the truck enjoying the rush of pollinated wind while Jimmy and Skip, up in the cab, decided to smoke one last joint to smooth the ride home. Hideous objected, but was overruled, and the cab soon filled with potent marijuana smoke. Twenty minutes later, Hideous was incapacitated by a contact high—his first.

Hideous pulled over, saying he could no longer steer. Giggling like a schoolgirl and demanding Oreo cookies, he flung open the driver’s side door and ran mincingly into the foxtails on the side of the road. When Jimmy and Skip tried to wrestle him back into the truck, Hideous held them off with mocking kung fu moves accompanied by Bruce Lee-style battle squawks. They were at a stalemate. No one was fit to drive. But then Jimmy suggested that Gordon take the wheel. As the only sober person, it was his duty, Jimmy explained, and narcolepsy was no excuse. Everyone promised not to excite him. Hideous thought this was a fine idea—hilarious in its way. He clambered over the side of the truck into the pick-up bed and promptly fell asleep.

So Gordon found himself driving for the first time in his life. Jimmy and Skip sat in the cab with him, peppering him with instructions. Hideous’ truck had an automatic transmission, so there wasn’t much to it, actually. Gordon was a bit nervous at first, but after he got the truck up to speed he started to enjoy the sensation of being in the driver’s seat, piloting a large vehicle along an endless stretch of asphalt. Few other cars or trucks shared the road with them. Jimmy tuned in Steely Dan’s “Do It Again” on a distant radio station and turned it up. They were just cruising along feeling euphoric. The whole world seemed a place of infinite goodness. But then, as they approached the junction where Highway 168 turned into North Academy Road, a shiny red eighteen-wheeler blasted its air horn as it was passing them on the left. The sudden noise in the turbulent wake

of the mighty truck's passage so shocked Gordon that he dropped into an instant narcoleptic paralysis. Jimmy and Skip—lulled by pot and the long miles Gordon had already driven without incident—didn't realize what had happened until Hideous' truck drifted off the road, bounced over a small ditch, and then started heading toward the open-air Mexican garden statue market set up in a gravel field to the left of where the two roads met.

Hideous' truck was still traveling at about thirty miles an hour when it hit the first plaster gnome. Jimmy had tried wresting the steering wheel from Gordon's sleepy grip, but by then it was too late. They plowed over the bearded gnome in his hooded red parka, sending him clattering beneath the truck's transmission, where he shattered to pieces. Then the truck's chrome push-guard knocked over a four-foot-tall statue of the Virgin Mary cradling the baby Jesus. The baby Jesus flew out of Mary's arms on impact. Hideous' B.F. Goodrich All-Terrain Radials rolled right over him, crunching Jesus' plaster skull like an egg. After that it was a massacre: froggy flower vendors, donkeys half-asleep under yellow sombreros, turtles wearing tiny black top hats, a sultry Nereid being pulled in a white sleigh by twin sea horses, St. Francis with teensy bluebirds on his shoulders—all were crushed, decimated, left in shards and ruins.

The truck didn't come to a complete stop until it bounced against a chain-link fence hung with half-a-dozen zebra skin rugs and some choice black velvet paintings. A six-foot tall portrait of a blue-eyed Siberian Tiger shook loose from the fence during the bounce and fell face down in the dirt. At that point the two Mexican brothers who owned and operated the market were running toward the truck shouting South-of-the-Border obscenities. They were big men in dusty rolled up jeans and wife-beater T-shirts. Their deeply tanned arms were ropy with muscles and dotted with prison tattoos: crude bluish-green spiders and swastikas and an Eye of Fatima dripping tears. "Oh shit..." Skip said, as he got out of the truck to greet them. While Hideous and D.H. cowered in back, Jimmy climbed on top of still-comatose Gordon and prepared to put the truck into reverse.

"¡Pendejos! You run over Baby Jesus!" said the first brother.

"We will kill you with death!" said the other brother. "You ruin our business!"

“*Mira!*” said the first brother, picking up the painting of the Siberian Tiger and leaning it against the fence. “A great master of Mexico paint this masterpiece, but now, who will buy it? It is ruined!”

“It’s just a little dusty,” said Skip, inspecting the painting. “Couldn’t you, like, vacuum it off or something?”

“*¡Ay, cabrón!* He says to use the vacuum cleaner! On so great a masterpiece as this! *¡Pinche gringo!* You know nothing of art!”

“Look, I can see it’s *muy fabuloso*,” said Skip, “but if you just brush off those little dirt clods, I’m sure it’ll be fine. As for the statues we busted up—well, let’s work out a deal. We’ll pay you for ‘em, I guess.”

But the brothers would not be so easily consoled. They demanded two thousand dollars for the Siberian Tiger painting and when Skip said that seemed a bit excessive, they both pulled out switchblades. Meanwhile, Jimmy had thrown the truck into reverse with a loud ringing clank, but Gordon’s tangled feet got in the way of the accelerator and the engine stalled. One of the brothers leapt to the driver’s side window and put his blade next to Jimmy’s throat.

“*¡No me jodas!* You think you can just drive away, *maricón?*”

And that was where things stood when Johnny Hoss walked up.

“We got us a problem here, *amigos?*”

The two brothers turned. Johnny Hoss stood before them wearing steel-toed work boots, dark blue jeans, and a plaid flannel shirt stretched tight across his muscular gut. His knuckles cracked inside brown leather driving gloves as he clenched his hands into fists. In an instant, the brothers knew he could take them both, knives or no knives—it didn’t make a difference.

Johnny’s shiny red Freightliner stood by the side of the highway about a hundred yards to the north. It was his air horn that had blown when he’d passed Hideous’ truck and recognized Gordon behind the wheel. Three years ago, Gordon’s Uncle Gerald had fired Johnny without any explanation while Gordon was away camping after his father’s funeral. Johnny soon found work as a long-haul trucker. He stopped by to say hello to Gordon and the rest of the lumberyard crew every few months, but Gordon missed their day-to-day contact. Somehow, they’d never gotten around to discussing the topic of narcolepsy.

"These boys, they kill Baby Jesus!" the brother holding the knife under Jimmy's chin said with great vehemence.

"I'm sure they didn't mean nothin' by it," Johnny responded, pushing the brother aside to open the door of Hideous' truck. He found Gordon slumped across the front seat, struggling for air under the weight of Jimmy, who was sitting on his chest. Johnny helped Gordon sit up.

"Oh, hi, Johnny..." Gordon wheezed, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to see his old friend standing amid a heap of demolished garden statues with two menacing Mexicans behind him brandishing switchblades.

"Who will pay for all this shit and disaster?" one of the Mexican brothers asked.

Johnny turned to them and took out his wallet. "I'll give y'all fifty bucks," he said. "I'm sure all this crap cost a lot less when you bought it down in Tijuana."

"This is a terrible insult! Are we but donkeys? What of our travel expense?"

"Take it or leave it, *muchachos*."

The Mexican brothers put away their switchblades and took the money. Then they stood around grumbling and kicking gravel until Johnny told them to *vamanos*. As they shuffled away, Gordon promised to pay Johnny back, but Johnny said not to worry about it—he was making good money now. They talked for a while about narcolepsy and the loneliness of being a long-haul trucker. At some point during that conversation, Hideous climbed out of the pick-up bed and announced that he felt sober enough to drive again. Johnny helped them get the truck back out on the road, making sure the Mexican brothers didn't come after them for more money. Hideous gave him a ride back to the Freightliner. As Johnny climbed up the chrome ladder bolted to the side of the gleaming red cab, he gave them a cheery wave and shouted a parting word of advice:

"Remember, guys, there's always a bigger dog."

"*There's always a bigger dog...*" Lloyd mulls that one over. "*Hmmph!* That reminds me of some advice my paternal grandfather gave me when I was about your age." Lloyd pauses long enough to make eye

contact with D.H., Jimmy, and Gordon as Iggy Pop croons the words to “Sea of Love” from the stereo behind them. “I was always tongue-tied around pretty girls. Then one day the old man sat me down and said, ‘Just keep this in mind, young Lloyd: for every beautiful woman, there’s a man somewhere who’s getting tired of her.’”

“Wow, that is *deeply* cynical,” says Gordon, who’s decided he doesn’t like Lloyd, although he doesn’t understand *why* just yet. “Did it help?”

“Well, at first I fell victim to your man’s ‘Bigger Dog’ conundrum. I thought to myself, *‘Sure, a man may be getting tired of her, but that man probably has more money and a bigger penis than I myself.’* So I still felt nervous! But then, lucky for me, I grew up to be filthy rich and hung like a damn donkey, so now I can bed any woman I want.”

“Like a donkey, you say?” asks D.H., still affecting a clinical demeanor.

“Yes. One young lady rather picturesquely described my male endowment as ‘Sixteen Inches of Dangling Death.’”

“Is that in dog inches?” Jimmy jokes. D.H. and Gordon try not to laugh.

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should remain silent,” Lloyd says archly. “By the way, who puked in my Tang Dynasty vase?”

“Um, that’d be me,” Jimmy owns up

“What were you eating—linguini?”

“Top Ramen noodles, Cap’n Crunch... but mostly just a whole lot of beer and rum.”

“Keep carrying on like that, and the odds are incredibly good that at least one of you will die before you reach the age of twenty-one. In fact,” Lloyd says, “I’d bet money on it. Your little group should form a limited liability company. Then you could take out life insurance policies on each other and make them payable to the company—so when one of you dies, the others can divvy up the death benefits.”

“Sounds cool,” Jimmy says.

“With death benefits of, say, half-a-million each, the monthly premiums would hardly amount to anything, seeing as you’re all so young. I’d even cover the payments myself, if you cut me in on the deal.”

"But who would insure us?" D.H. asks. "Wouldn't it be bad for your company if you're so sure one of us will be cashing in early?"

"I've already considered that. There's a new insurance agent from Fresno who's been horning in on my territory. A man named Petrossian. That benighted prick deserves your business. Are you men up for a little paperwork?"

"I guess..." says Gordon, "but won't we need a lawyer first?" He's growing increasingly suspicious.

"Fuck it," Lloyd says. "My guys'll handle it for you."

"All right!" shouts Jimmy.

"And now, young James, why don't you take my highly-valuable twelve-hundred-year-old vase and go wash it out in the kitchen sink."

While Jimmy goes off to scrub the barf out of Lloyd's vase, Gordon mentions that his grandfather used to be in Lloyd's business.

"Insurance is one of the most lucrative professions in the world," Lloyd says proudly. "Your grandfather would have been able to attest to that. I've heard he was one of the greats."

Insurance is all about statistical probabilities, like gambling, Lloyd explains—but the odds are stacked in favor of insurers in a way that Las Vegas casino operators can only envy. Insurers prey on people's fears, selling them a product they hope they'll never have to use. The sum of the premiums paid on the vast majority of policies, over the years, far exceeds the value of the claims made against them. "And those claims are often disputed," Lloyd confides with a wink.

D.H. quotes Tom Waits: "The large print giveth, and the small print taketh away."

"Exactly!" says Lloyd. "Look: I provide people a service by allowing them to hedge their risk against unmitigated disasters. But there's no reason I have to make it easy for them. If they enter into an agreement without scrutinizing it, then why shouldn't I take advantage of their negligence? Sometimes the sheer amount of paperwork I throw at people will cause them to give up in disgust and walk away from perfectly valid claims."

"Don't you feel guilty, taking advantage of people like that?" asks Gordon.

“Guilty? It’s the American way! This country was *founded* on the principle of taking advantage of other people. Look at what we did to the Native Americans—not only did we steal their land; we subjected them to the most brutal campaign of genocide in human history. America is one big Indian burial ground, when you get right down to it. And then we kick-started our mighty economic engine by exploiting African slaves. If you think anyone ever gets rich without taking advantage of other people, you’re just being willfully naïve. ‘Behind every fortune lies a crime.’ I believe it was Balzac who said that—or Mario Puzo.... If it’s not written into our Constitution, it’s somewhere in *The Godfather*, I’m almost certain.”

“So the Rockefellers, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan... all those guys were criminals?”

“Absolutely, along with a whole raft of others. They’d include Joseph Kennedy—a known bootlegger—and our current Vice President’s father, Prescott Bush, who was cited in 1942 for trafficking with the Nazis under the Trading with the Enemy Act. Don’t they teach an honest version of U.S. history at your school?”

“They hardly teach us anything,” Gordon admits. “If it was up to our right-wing high school principal, we wouldn’t even be allowed to read Mark Twain.”

Lloyd sets his fleshy lips in an academic scowl and sets about enlightening them. “The Rockefellers made their fortune by ruthlessly eliminating their competitors, creating a monopoly that controlled ninety-five percent of all the oil produced in America around the turn of the century. They held onto that fortune by routinely violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and opposing unions. Striking workers were actually shot dead—forty of them in Colorado alone during the Ludlow Massacre of 1914. As criminal activities go, how’s that?”

“Not bad,” Gordon admits. “I don’t suppose anyone went to jail for it.”

“Quite the contrary.... The Rockefellers remain one of the most powerful families in America. David Rockefeller likely wields more influence over global politics, through the Council on Foreign Relations, than even President Reagan. And his brother Nelson, with his misguided drug laws, is responsible for putting more people behind

bars than anyone since Stalin—the vast majority of them blacks and Latinos.”

“That’s fucking insane...” D.H. says.

“It’s nothing compared to the infernal schemes going on behind the curtain of international banking,” Lloyd says. “That’s where the real money is—where they print it. And the Rockefellers are just the tip of the iceberg.” He catches Gordon rolling his eyes. “Trust me on this,” Lloyd tells him. “I’m a high-ranking Scottish Freemason and a graduate of the London School of Economics. Mick Jagger was a fellow classmate.”

“No way! You knew Mick Jagger?” D.H. sounds like he wants an autograph.

While Lloyd explains how he and the lead singer for The Rolling Stones were educated in fractional-reserve banking, fiat money, and the covert machinations of the House of Rothschild, Gordon tunes in to the sexy French chanteuse singing “Ballad of a Thin Man” on the stereo. She’s turning Dylan’s sneering accusations into a seduction. Her band, Les Veilleurs, has traded the original track’s jangly upright piano for a Steinway playing at a much slower tempo in a nightclub deep underground. Ice clinking against whiskey glasses, velvety murmurs from the crowd, and a shimmering drumbeat provide a dreamy sense of drift and dislocation. The lyrics, sung with a languid French accent, have never sounded more erotic:

*You’ve been with the professors
And they’ve all liked your looks.
With great lawyers you have
Discussed lepers and crooks.
You’ve been through all of
F. Scott Fitzgerald’s books.
You’re very well read
It’s well known.
But something is happening here
And you don’t know what it is,
Do you, Mister Jones?*

Oh crap... Gordon thinks to himself. *Who’s Mister Jones here? Me?* Jimmy’s uncle seems to be doing his Mephistophelean best to clue

them in to the Big Picture—*The History of Corporate Evil in America*, or whatever—but Gordon is having a hard time following him. He’s too buzzed to concentrate. And that French girl isn’t helping. Her torchy singing is giving him a brain-dimming boner screaming, “Fly me to Paris and *get me laid!*”

“Predatory lending...” Lloyd is saying, “that’s the key. Goad your intended victim into taking on debt and then use that debt as a means of control. It works on governments as well as individuals. The Rothschilds understood this method and exploited it better than anyone. Using the National City Bank of Cleveland as a front, they financed John D. Rockefeller’s monopolistic acquisitions for Standard Oil. Now the Rockefellers control several key transnational corporations along with Chase Manhattan—arguably the most powerful bank in America—but who controls the Rockefellers? The answer is: the Rothschilds, of course.”

“...*Here is your throat back, thanks for the loan,*” the French singer purrs.

“Yeah, well... so how does that relate to any of us?” Gordon asks, feeling surly. Lloyd’s mouthful of expensive dentistry has been clacking away as he speaks, affronting Gordon’s nostrils with a funky halitosis. It smells like a raw Porterhouse steak that’s been left in the refrigerator too long. It isn’t doing anything to make Gordon think more highly of him.

“It relates in two ways,” Lloyd says, heedless of the slaughterhouse images he’s conjuring inside Gordon’s skull. “On a microeconomic level, you have the pernicious influence of credit cards, the means by which bankers feed off the financial life-blood of the masses, much the same way as vampire bats feed off of cattle. It’s predatory lending on an unimaginably vast scale. You probably didn’t know this, but that little experiment in picking your pocket got its start right here in Fresno County. Back in 1958, Bank of America did the first credit card mass mailing to 66,000 unsuspecting Fresno County families. It was a huge success, obviously—for the bankers. By 1960, over two million cards were in circulation throughout California, at generally usurious rates.

“On the macroeconomic side of things, we handed over control of our economy—and thus our government—to a cartel of international

bankers when Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. That ingenious piece of legislation was cobbled together in a secret meeting at J.P. Morgan's private retreat out on Jekyll Island. Morgan was in on it, of course, as were the Rockefellers and the Rothschilds. The American public has been whipsawed for gigantic profits from pre-engineered bouts of inflation and deflation ever since. Wars, recessions, even Presidential elections—the Fed controls it all with monetary policy, our economy's magic elixir."

Didn't Robert Louis Stevenson write Jekyll and Hyde right around the turn of the century? Gordon wonders by association. (He'll look it up in a few days and discover that *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was published in 1886.)

"All this predatory lending bullshit is giving me a headache," D.H. says. "I need another beer. Anyone else want one?" Gordon and Lloyd both say yes to the beers and D.H. heads off to the kitchen to get them.

"Sadly, that's how most people respond when confronted with the truth about their role in a consumer society," Lloyd says once D.H. is out of earshot. "They either seek oblivion in alcohol and mindless entertainment, or distract themselves with sex."

"Or they convince themselves they're above it all by gorging on expensive meals and buying into a cool but ultimately hollow and meaningless lifestyle," says Gordon, indicating his surroundings.

"Thank you..." says Lloyd, patting Gordon's shoulder. "I truly mean that. Your honesty is a breath of fresh air. Deep down, I know I'm just a fat man without a family. But we all have our little foibles. For instance, I can see that *you* fancy yourself as a bit of a spiritual seeker."

Gordon shrugs, embarrassed, but drunk enough to plow ahead with a sloppy sort of sincerity. "I just want answers to a few basic questions," he says. "Like: Why are we here? Where are we going? And why do we have to suffer along the way?"

"I'm not suffering, in case you haven't noticed."

"Yeah, but I think *I* would, if I had to live the way you do."

"You very well might," Lloyd says with a thoughtful look unseen up until then.

"I'm just curious... what makes you think you deserve so much more than most other people? And why doesn't it bother you when you screw them over to get it? I mean, your happiness is predicated on someone else's misery. That's seriously fucked-up...." Gordon staggers a bit as he says this, as if flinching from an anticipated punch.

"A fatal lack of love must have warped my conscience," says Lloyd, but he's just being droll. There's more amusement in his eyes than malice.

"Have you ever been married?"

"Always a mistake, but yes, I was. To a Miss Laura Olivia Selden-Biddle—of good stock, but my God, what an ice queen she turned out! Don't believe anything you hear about the divorce settlement. I screwed that soul-killing shrew six ways to Sunday."

"And you've been obsessed with how the government screws you ever since."

"Along with the big corporations and the cartel of international bankers, yes."

"Y'know, I'm not sure I believe even half the stuff you've been telling us. For all I know, it could be just a bunch of lies and Masonic disinformation."

"Masonic disinformation... it's funny you should mention that," says Lloyd. "Let's go upstairs to my office. I have something there I'd like to show you. It has to do with your father."

Gordon's first thought, uncharitably, is that Lloyd is a pederast who just wants to get him alone someplace so he can put the moves on him. In close quarters with nowhere to run, Gordon wouldn't stand a chance against Lloyd's massive bulk. It would be like getting humped by a pervy bull walrus. But then he thinks, *What if Lloyd really knows something about my dad? What if he has some sort of clue that would help explain the plane crash?* He decides it's worth the risk to find out. Lloyd is already halfway up a wooden flight of steps next to the foyer. As Gordon pushes past his partying classmates to catch up to him, the twitchy guitars of Television's "Marquee Moon" ring out through Lloyd's powerful and expensive speakers. Someone has cranked up the volume. Like so much else Gordon has heard this evening, the song seems to convey a deeper meaning that he isn't quite ready to fathom. As Tom Verlaine sings it in his CBGB's-honed yawp:

*I spoke to a man down at the tracks,
And I asked him how he don't go mad.
He said: 'Look here, junior, don't you be so happy,
And for Heaven's sake, don't you be so sad.'*



The first thing Gordon notices when he steps into Lloyd's office is a big red tin umbrella cut in half perpendicularly and protruding from the wall behind Lloyd's desk like an awning. It's a three-dimensional replica of the famous red umbrella logo used by the Travelers Insurance Company in all their advertising. Lloyd is seated beneath it, the top half of his face obscured by the umbrella's shadow.

"I know I've fed you quite a bit of information tonight," says Lloyd, turning on a desktop computer. "The brain is like the stomach—there's only so much it can absorb at any given time. But if you take away just one thing from this evening, always remember this: the banks and insurance companies are only too happy to sell you an umbrella on a sunny day, but they'll yank it away from you at the first sign of rain.

"Now, as an example, take my own company.... We issued accident policies for all three of the manned Skylab missions, believe it or not. But did we pay anything out when Skylab scattered itself in flaming chunks across the Earth's troposphere? No, we did not. If some New Zealand Aborigine caught a piece of meteor shield shrapnel in his Maori-tattooed forehead, that was just his tough luck."

"Why are you telling me this?" Gordon asks, perplexed.

"Because I like you, Gordon," Lloyd says, leaning into the light. "And I feel bad about what happened to your father. I knew him, you know.... Not in any sort of public way, but behind the scenes—through mutual friends." Lloyd takes a small, black-framed picture off the wall beside his desk. "Here..." he says, passing it to Gordon, "this is what I wanted you to look at. Recognize anyone?"

It's a photograph of Lloyd grinning wildly, most likely drunk, with his fat arm around the waist of a pale man in a navy blue suit. The man

in the suit has the lipless, bland, lizard-like countenance of George H.W. Bush.

“Is that the Vice President?”

“It is indeed...” says Lloyd. “And that’s me. But what about the third man?”

There’s another man on the opposite side of the Vice President wearing tinted aviator sunglasses and a grin nearly as demented as Lloyd’s. His face isn’t immediately recognizable to Gordon—Hunter S. Thompson would be his first guess—but then it dawns on him:

“That’s Arnie Andersen!” Gordon exclaims. “He played the bagpipes at my dad’s funeral.”

“Correct,” says Lloyd. “You wouldn’t know it by looking at him, but Arnie is a 33rd degree Mason—the highest degree attainable in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. He’s now a servant of the *arcantum arcandrum*, the sacred secret. As am I, and as is our friend there, Mr. Bush.”

“I thought Arnie knew my dad from the Hoo-Hoo Club.”

“So he did. There’s no rule saying a man can’t belong to more than one secret society. The Hoo-Hoos and the Masons have similar origins and share a similar agenda. Both are doorways to the Ancient Mystery Cults of Babylon and Egypt, tracing their lineage through the Rosicrucians, the Knights Templar, Euclid, Melchizedek—and even so far back as Hermes Trismegistus and the sons of Lamech.”

“The Hoo-Hoo Club? Are you shittin’ me? They’re just a bunch of ego-tripping hardware store clerks. They might get wild and crazy at the Ramada Inn every year and bite each other in their underpants, but that doesn’t make them wizards.”

“True. There are yahoos aplenty in the ranks of the Hoo-Hoos,” says Lloyd, “and jackasses of every stripe among the Masons and their other affiliates as well. But all of those organizations have a pyramidal power structure, and the men at the highest levels have far more in common with each other than they do with those under them, whom they govern. Your father, as you must’ve been aware, was next in line for the top position in the Hoo-Hoo Club’s leadership. The Snark of the Universe, I believe they call it. That would have meant he was being tested. I’m not certain as to their exact methods, but it’s likely

your father would have been required to pass through trials by fire, by earth, by air, and by water—to see if he was worthy of being entrusted with the sacred secret.”

“What sacred secret?” asks Gordon.

“As they’re so fond of saying in the military,” Lloyd smirks, “*I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.*”

“Oh, get over yourself...” says Gordon. “What secrets could you guys possibly have that are so fucking important? I mean, you were about to tell my dad. He wasn’t exactly James Bond—*or was he?*”

“No, he wasn’t. But that’s my point. He may have been tested and found wanting. The Great Architect of the Universe may have deemed him unworthy.”

“You mean—”

“That plane crash might not have been an accident.”

“Shit...” says Gordon. It comes out as a dry wheeze. “Do you know who did it?”

“Who? Or *what*. There are forces at work in this world far beyond the ken of the ordinary man.”

Archons... a Dark Brotherhood... thinks Gordon, but he keeps his mouth shut for now. He wants to hear what Lloyd has to say about it.

“I think you need a little grounding in Masonic history,” says Lloyd, coming around from behind the desk to put his blubbery arm across Gordon’s shoulders. “It might help you better understand what was at stake.”

What’s at stake is my anal virginity, Gordon is thinking, but to avoid a possible end to their conversation, he just shrugs himself free and goes over to check out the computer on Lloyd’s desk.

“Is that one of the new Apples?” he asks.

“It is,” says Lloyd, walking over to stand behind him. “They call it the Lisa. Its official release date is set for this January. It’s the first home computer with a Graphical User Interface. Which means, in other words, that it was built with alien technology in use here on Earth prior to Noah’s Flood, but then lost—or nearly lost. The knowledge of that technology was kept safe for millennia by the world’s secret societies. But that’s getting ahead of the story I’d meant to tell.”

“So you’re saying Steve Jobs is an alien?” Gordon scoffs, edging away from Lloyd again.

“No, not exactly... but keep an eye on Bill Gates, the chairman of Microsoft.”

“What—is he a Mason, too?”

“No, but he intuits the designs of the First Builder, who works in algorithms, as well as stone. We recognize him as a brother.”

There are other photographs on Lloyd’s wall that Gordon pretends to take an interest in: Lloyd in a tweed suit with Margaret Thatcher, Lloyd wearing Mickey Mouse ears with Roy Disney, Lloyd playing golf with Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford.

“Y’know, it’s weird...” says Gordon, “but my grandmother was talking to me tonight about a Dark Brotherhood. She thinks they’re involved in political assassinations somehow. Would you know anything about that?”

“I’d say your grandmother must be a very wise old woman.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t be too sure about that. She also thinks Frank Sinatra is a shape-shifting reptileman.”

“She’s right,” says Lloyd.

“What?” Gordon turns around. Lloyd is looking at him with a jaded emptiness, dead serious.

“Look—do you want the truth, or do you want to keep your so-called sanity?”

Gordon suddenly feels overheated. The werewolf fur on his neck is starting to itch. “Can’t I do both?” he asks.

“You can try.” Lloyd doesn’t sound optimistic. “Only a few have developed eyes that permit them to gaze into the face of truth and live. Perhaps you’re one of them.”

“Truth, then,” says Gordon. “What the hell.”

Lloyd settles his hoggish frame into the leather chair behind his desk and taps at his computer keyboard. A document appears on the screen. “We don’t have time tonight to take you through a complete history of Freemasonry and its alliances with other secret societies such as the Jacobins and Adam Weishaupt’s Illuminati,” he says. “You can find a wealth of that material on your own, if you’re so inclined. Since it’s assassinations and shape-shifting reptilians you’re interested in, we

need to go back to the Knights Templar and their discoveries in the Middle East. Specifically—what they found in the tunnels beneath the ruins of King Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, and what they learned from their encounters with Hasan bin Sabbah’s fanatical Islamic sect, the Assassins.”

“You’re not shy about any of this lunatic fringe stuff, are you?”

Leaning back in his chair, Lloyd obscures his face in shadow again. “So much sheer crap has been written about the Templars,” he says. “They’ve been turned into the ultimate woo-woo mystery cult. Do you know much about them?”

“Not really...” Gordon admits, “just that they were Catholic warrior-monks with a lot of strange rumors flying around them. But I read somewhere that they left the Cathars alone during the Albigensian Crusade while the other Crusaders went after them. I’ve always sort of liked them for that.”

“Ah, yes, the good men and good women of Languedoc.... Such gentle people, the Cathars. Gnostic vegetarians, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I’m pretty sure they also ate fish.”

“And if you believe the legends, they marched straight into the bonfires singing at the top of their lungs when the Crusaders burned them as heretics.” Lloyd marches his fat fingers across the scattered papers on his desk.

“Yeah, they weren’t afraid of dying,” says Gordon. “They believed Jesus was a spiritual prophet of the True God and they practiced what he preached way better than the Crusaders ever did. I don’t know why the Pope had such a problem with them.”

“As I understand it, they were getting too popular. And the Church absolutely *abhorred* the Cathar’s assertion that they didn’t need a middleman between themselves and God. Direct access to God is always discouraged by religious institutions, because such access renders those institutions irrelevant. Hence, the Inquisition. I take it you’re sympathetic to the Cathars’ beliefs?”

“I’ve read a few books on Gnosticism since my dad died,” Gordon admits. “Their whole idea that the world is too evil to have been created by a perfect, loving god—it just rings true for me. What if we’re really angels who got suckered into incarnating in these human

bodies by a half-mad Demiurge, like the Cathars believed? It makes you look at life in a whole new way.”

“You should count yourself lucky you were born in this century. A few hundred years ago the Inquisition would have had you on their To Do list.”

“Like I was saying....”

“Yes, well, getting back to the Templars... they were also misunderstood in their day, as I was telling you. I fancy myself sort of an amateur medieval historian. I have a timeline here—” Lloyd points to his computer—“of significant Templar-related events. Would you care to look at it?”

“Um, sure,” Gordon says, curious. He leans over Lloyd’s desk. On the computer screen, he sees a long list of dates accompanied by brief descriptions. He takes a few minutes to scroll through it:

- 1095 *First Crusade launched by Pope Urban II (“God wills it!”) to wrest control of the Christian Holy Land and the sacred city of Jerusalem from the hands of Muslims. Remission of sins offered to anyone who dies in the undertaking.*
- 1099 *Heavily outnumbered, but inspired by Peter Desiderius’ divine vision of the sacred city falling to the Crusaders after a siege of nine days (as in Joshua’s siege on Jericho), the First Crusade captures Jerusalem. Almost every inhabitant of the city massacred, some 70,000 in all, including women and children (see Muslim historian Ibn al-Athîr). Many sought shelter in the mosques at the Temple Mount where, in the words of one purported eyewitness: “the slaughter was so great that our men waded in blood up to their ankles.”*
- 1119 *Nine knights led by Hugh de Payens present themselves to King Baldwin II in Jerusalem for the purpose of protecting pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land. After taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they’re installed in the Al-Aqsa Mosque at the southern end of the Temple Mount platform, former site of King Solomon’s Temple. Hence their name: Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon—or the Knights Templar.*
- 1127 *First Templar Grand Master Payens and other early Templars, including André de Montbard, return to Europe seeking recruits and funds. What the original nine Templars actually did during their first nine years remains a mystery. A growing consensus believes they were excavating under the Temple Mount, looking for treasure. Later*

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archeological expeditions by Warren (1867), Parker (1911), and Ben-Dov (1968) tended to confirm this.

- 1128 *The Council of Troyes recognizes the Knights Templar as an official military and religious order. A Papal Rule for the order is prepared by Bernard of Clairvaux (canonized as St. Bernard in 1174), founder of the Cistercian Order, nephew of André de Montbard, and enthusiastic cheerleader for the Templars during their first few decades of existence. Running to seventy-two articles, the Rule defines the Templars' dual roles as knights and monks. The Pope gives the Templars his blessing and sanctions contributions to the order. Thus begins their unprecedented rise to wealth and power.*
- 1129 *Grand Master Payens returns to the Holy Land with 300 new knights, guarding a large contingent of pilgrims along the way. The Templars then join in an ill-fated attack on Damascus led by King Baldwin II. Their allies in this attack are Nizari Ismailis—also known at that time as the Assassins.*
- 1139 *By now the Templars own land in France, Germany, England, Scotland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Austria. Pope Innocent II, a protégé of Saint Bernard, decrees that wherever the Templars own property, they are answerable to no one but the papacy. He exempts them from all taxes, tithes, and tolls and allows them to levy taxes and accept tithing on their own land. He also grants them the unusual right to build their own churches.*
- 1145 *Pope Eugenius III issues the bull Quantum praedecessores, calling for the Second Crusade. Saint Bernard preaches the Second Crusade in France and Germany. The Pope also sends him to Languedoc to preach against Catharism, but Saint Bernard reports back: "No sermons are more Christian than theirs, and their morals are pure." This later leads to speculation that Saint Bernard and the Templars secretly shared Cathar beliefs.*

That's just the first fifty years.... There's more, but Gordon has seen enough. What little he's read about the Templars is coming back to him and Lloyd is only too happy to fill in the rest:

"By the end of the twelfth-century, the Templars had become the world's first multinational corporation. They'd built out an enormous financial support network with headquarters in London and Paris—and they were only getting bigger. They were well on the way to becoming the first modern bankers, predating the Medicis and the Rothschilds. Before they were betrayed in 1307 by King Philip the

Fair—whom they easily could have bankrupted—they controlled one of the most powerful financial institutions the Western world has ever seen.”

“No wonder you’re so into these guys.”

“They were brilliant!” Lloyd enthuses. “People donated land and funds to the Templars because they wanted to secure their immortal souls—a rube’s game if there ever was one. The Templars organized those holdings into productive communities called preceptories. They also built commanderies along all the major trade routes. Then they invented what we now think of as traveler’s checks—letters of credit, written in cipher, that could be redeemed for local currency at any Templar outpost.”

“*Templar Express*. Don’t leave home without it,” says Gordon, thinking of the American Express commercials featuring Karl Malden—the big-nosed actor who played a cop on the hit TV series, “The Streets of San Francisco.”

“Joke all you want, but it solved a huge problem. Travel was extremely risky at the time. There were bandits everywhere. But the Templars were trusted. No individual knight could grow rich—they’d all taken the vow of poverty, remember? But that didn’t mean the Order itself couldn’t prosper.... The Templars had gotten used to handling large sums of money for their war effort. Now, for a small service fee, someone could deposit enough money to cover their travel expenses at a Templar establishment in Paris, say, and then pick it up again, with a letter of credit, in Jerusalem—or just about anywhere.

“Those service fees, along with income from their preceptories, started piling up. The Templars put their money to work, making loans to kings and the Holy See. The Church had a ban against usury at the time, but the Templars somehow got around that. They were innovators in every field they got into: banking, farming, shipping, building, trade fairs—you name it. Almost entirely by their efforts alone, they were pulling the European economy out of the Dark Ages.”

“I thought this was supposed to be about a treasure hunt and secret meetings with the Assassins,” Gordon says.

"I'm getting to that. Don't worry..." says Lloyd. "But the question you should be asking yourself right now is: 'Where did all that specialized knowledge come from?'"

"Okay... so where did all that specialized knowledge come from?" Gordon asks, playing along.

"Some people think the Order of Assassins had something to do with it," Lloyd says, "and I tend to agree with them. It's a matter of historical record that numerous pacts, tributes, and treaties existed between the Templars and the Assassins. Both were at war against Saladin and the Seljuk Turks, and you know the old saying: 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' The Templars are thought of as the first modern militia, while the Assassins are considered the world's first terrorists, using stealth and cunning to kill their richer and more powerful adversaries—often from within their own strongholds. The two orders had a mutual respect for each other. They might have freely exchanged knowledge during the many years when they weren't in direct conflict with each other."

"They could've written a great self-help book together: *How to Win Friends Like the Pope and Assassinate Your Political Enemies. Or: Nurturing the Murderous Religious Fanatic Within.*"

"Funny," Lloyd grumbles, flicking a bead of sweat off his brow. "However, there was much more to the Assassins than just targeted killings. The sect's original leader, Hasan bin Sabbah, was a renowned Persian mystic and scholar. He'd been inducted into the Brotherhood of the Grand Lodge of Cairo—a repository for esoteric knowledge in mathematics, astronomy, and theology passed down from the days of Adam and Noah. In 1090, by some clever ploy, Hasan took possession of the mountain fortress at Alamut, 6,000 feet above the Caspian Sea near modern-day Tehran. There, he and his followers lived by the motto: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.'"

"Sounds like the set-up for a non-stop orgy," says Gordon.

"That came later, in 1164, when one of Hasan's successors, Hasan II, proclaimed the *Qiyama*, or Great Resurrection—an invitation to experience paradise on Earth, free from the strictures of morality or legalism. The original Hasan was actually quite a strict disciplinarian. He had his own son executed for drinking wine, to cite just one example."

"I guess everything wasn't permitted after all..."

"I suppose not," Lloyd says. "However, Hasan wasn't above using drugs and sex as recruitment techniques. According to legends propagated by Marco Polo—and here I quote—" Lloyd squints at his computer and reads aloud as a new document appears on the screen:

"—Whenever the Grand Master of the Assassins discovered a young man resolute enough to belong to his murderous legions, he invited the youth to his table and served him a potion of hashish. Under the spell of deep sleep induced by the drug, the young man was secretly transported to the Master's pleasure gardens where, upon waking, he imagined he had entered the Paradise of Mahomet. Trellises of roses and fragrant vines covered pavilions of jade and porcelain furnished with Persian carpets, soft divans, and Grecian embroideries. Delicious drinks in vessels of gold and crystal were served by young girls whose dark-daubed, unfathomable eyes caused them to resemble those virginal divinities known as the Houris. After the young man had enjoyed to satiety all the joys promised by the Prophet to his elect, he was drugged once more and returned to the presence of the Grand Master. There he was informed that he could perpetually enjoy the delights he had just tasted if he would take part in the war on the infidel as commanded by the Prophet. "Go thou and do this thing," said the Grand Master, presenting the youth with a golden dagger, "and when it is done my angels shall bear thee to paradise." And the assassin would go and perform the deed willingly."

"Man, that is some purple-ass prose," Gordon comments. "And those guys fell for it, huh? Even though it was a suicide mission."

"They were men of simple piety—credulous goat herders, for the most part. Of course they fell for it," says Lloyd. "In all, Hasan was responsible for some fifty targeted slayings over the course of his thirty-five year reign. That's not so very many when you consider the 70,000 men, women, and children slaughtered in Jerusalem during the First Crusade."

Gordon is more appalled than impressed. "Wow," he says, "so they were more like the Mafia, rather than just some dumb army."

“Where do you think the Mafia got its inspiration? The Assassins had a much greater impact on the world at large than most people realize,” Lloyd says, licking his lips. “Of course, the term *assassin* is now a commonplace. It was adopted by nearly every medieval European language. In popular theory, the word was derived from a corruption of the name for Hasan’s killers, *hashishim*, which was Arabic for ‘hashish user.’ But the legend that the Assassins committed their murders while under the influence of hashish is almost certainly false.”

“Yeah, well, murder isn’t exactly the first thing on the minds of any of the stoners I know,” Gordon observes. “After doing a few bong loads, they’d all pretty much rather listen to Pink Floyd or catch a movie by Big Stan Kubrick.”

“There’s that...” acknowledges Lloyd. “There’s also the less well-known theory that the term *assassin* was derived instead from the Arabic word *Assasseen*, meaning, ‘guardians’—as in ‘guardians of the secret.’ If true, it lends credence to the theory that the Assassins passed along certain mystical teachings to the Knights Templar, which were then incorporated into the secret Templar heresy that led to their persecution and to the dissolution of the Order. Do you know the story?”

“Not that well,” Gordon admits.

“The Templars were essentially brought down by a conspiracy of three men: the King of France, Philip the Fair; Philip’s papal stooge, Pope Clement the Fifth; and the first lawyer of the realm, Guillaume de Nogaret. Philip, as I mentioned earlier, was deeply in debt to the Templars. He also owed prodigious sums to Jewish moneylenders, but he solved that particular problem by having every Jew in his kingdom arrested on July 21st, 1306. Nogaret supervised that operation, which greatly added to the royal balance sheet by canceling out debts and contributing seized assets. In fact, it worked so well that Philip decided to apply the same tactic to the Templars, with the idea that he could seize their treasury and redirect their colossal banking system toward his own selfish ends.”

“Why didn’t the Templars just kick his royal ass?” Gordon asks. He knows it’s juvenile, but he’s thinking along the old lines of *Megalodon Vs. Tyrannosaurus Rex: Who Would Win?*

“It seems the Order was caught off-guard.... Philip, that crafty frog bastard, had sent sealed mandates to all the officers of his realm, which weren’t to be opened until a predetermined time. Inside was a document accusing the Templars of the vilest crimes imaginable—worded, no doubt, by Nogaret. It ordered the officers to arrest every French Templar at dawn on Friday, October 13th, 1307—which is where we get our superstition about Friday the 13th being unlucky. It’s estimated that some 5,000 Templars were rounded up and tossed into jail that day. What’s odd is that none of them put up a fight.”

“Yeah, what happened?” Gordon asks. “These guys were badass warrior-monks. But when the police showed up, they just fell on the ground and peed all over themselves like puppies? I don’t get it.”

“I doubt there was any urination involved,” Lloyd scowls. “And they would have been outnumbered. But the Templars were so well connected in those days—surely they would have gotten wind of the King’s plans. Actually, there’s a legend that the Templar treasure was smuggled out of France on a hay wain and put aboard a Templar ship, which then set sail for Scotland. If that’s true, then you have to ask yourself why so many of the knights were arrested, including Jacques de Molay, the Grand Master. Why didn’t they implement a counterattack, or simply disappear beforehand? Why submit? It’s almost as if they craved abjection.”

“Maybe they didn’t think they’d be in jail for all that long. They probably thought the Pope would bail them out. After all, they’d been doing the Church’s dirty work for close to 200 years.”

“Another Pope might have taken control of the situation, but Clement was weak. He claimed to be outraged by what King Philip had done, when he found out about it, but by then the Templars had been handed over to the Inquisition and confessions of heresy were being extorted from them under torture. Clement only roused himself to the mildest sort of passive-aggressive behavior in their defense, dragging out their trial for years. He may have been in collusion with Philip from the start.”

“What kind of heresies are we talking about?” Gordon asks. “Was it anything like what the Cathars were accused of? The Inquisition had them jacking off on the Eucharist and worshipping a giant toad that turned into a freezing-cold albino man who made them forget all about

Christianity with a kiss. They were also supposed to lick black cats on the ass and sodomize each other like maniacs.”

“When Clement released the articles of accusations against the Templars in 1308, they proved every bit as charming,” Lloyd says. “The list of 127 offenses included such highlights as spitting on the cross, kissing fellow knights on the behind, and worshipping a severed head called Baphomet. Article Five, I think, accused them of adoring a ‘certain cat’ in contempt of Christ and the orthodox faith. Sodomy was a given, seeing as how the Templar seal depicted two knights riding together on a single horse.”

“That reminds me...” says Gordon, “the Hoo-Hoo Club’s logo is a black cat with its back arched—”

“—and its tail curled into the shape of the number nine. It represents the original nine Templars, in case you were wondering... as well as the Nine Principles of the Great Ennead in the religion of ancient Egypt.” Lloyd seems pleased with the connection.

“So does that mean the Hoo-Hoos are a bunch of cat-worshipping butt-pirates?” Gordon has to ask. His father’s former sexual orientation is at stake.

“I’ve been told your father was relentlessly hetero, if that’s your concern,” Lloyd says, as if reading Gordon’s mind. He lets out a matronly sigh. “But I can’t vouch for every single one of the Hoo-Hoo Club’s members. They could be filled to the rafters with sodomites and cat-lickers, for all I know. Who cares?”

“Live and let live, right?”

“That’s never been the Holy See’s attitude, but yes, I believe others should be allowed to worship as they choose, without fear of reprisal. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by our Constitution’s First Amendment for a very good reason, and it’s not just because our first President belonged to a cult that was condemned as pagan and unlawful by the Catholic Church.”

“He did?” It’s news to Gordon.

“You didn’t know? George Washington was a Grand Master Freemason. At least fifty of the fifty-six signatories to the Declaration of Independence were Masons as well. And in 1738, just a year after Chevalier Andrew Ramsay had publicly suggested a link between

Freemasonry and the Knights Templar, Pope Clement the Twelfth issued the famous bull, *In Eminenti*, which threatened any Catholic joining the Masons with excommunication.”

“Four hundred years later and they’re still pissed, huh?”

“The Church knows how to hold a grudge.”

“I guess. Do you think the Templars really did any of that stuff, like spit on the cross?”

“No one knows for sure,” says Lloyd, “but my answer would be a qualified ‘yes.’ Almost every imprisoned Templar confessed to spitting on the cross, but they often said they did it with ‘mouth only, not with heart.’ Some said the practice had been instituted after a Templar Grand Master’s imprisonment by a Muslim sultan. The Grand Master had been forced to deny Christ in order to secure his release. So the practice of spitting on the cross may have been a rehearsal for the humiliation that captured Templars would face—thereby preparing them to commit apostasy without really meaning it.

“There’s a simpler explanation, though—one the Church would like even less. It goes back to the Cathar belief that all matter is intrinsically evil. They believed Jesus was a part of God, an emanation, who never assumed physical form on Earth. In other words, Christ’s whole show was a projected illusion, meant to teach poor, fallen humanity how to obtain *Gnosis*—or knowledge—of their condition so they could escape it. Jesus never suffered on the cross, because he had no body to suffer in. To the Cathars, the cross was a symbol of the material world to be despised, not venerated. Perhaps the Templars were being taught something similar.”

A wave of nausea shudders through Gordon. His insides feel like a just-flushed toilet filling up with heavy water. He wonders if it’s alcohol poisoning or Kierkegaardian fear and trembling. “But I thought the Templars were materialists,” Gordon says, feeling self-conscious and shaky. “I mean, Philip wouldn’t have gone after them if they hadn’t turned into bankers and piled up all that loot.”

“You have a good point,” Lloyd says. “You also look as if you could use a drink.” He reaches into the desk’s bottom drawer and pulls out a sinister green bottle. Its faded label appears to have been chewed by worms. *Terminus*, it reads. With much ceremony, Lloyd places two squat glasses on his desktop and pours three fingers of the clear liquid

into each of them. Then he gets a pierced spoon from the drawer, along with two cubes of sugar. Cradling the sugar in the spoon and balancing it over a glass, Lloyd next produces a bottle of French mineral water. As he pours the water over the sugar, the liquor pearls to the color of sea foam.

“What is that stuff?” Gordon asks him.

“*Absinthe*...” Lloyd says grandly. “The Green Fairy. It’s getting very hard to find these days. It’s been banned for almost 70 years.”

He hands the glass to Gordon, who asks, “You’re sure it’s not poison?”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t tell you there’s a *little* poison in it,” Lloyd admits, “but it’s the kind of poison that inoculates you against the bigger poison you’re already swimming in: the consensus reality that everyone is expected to swallow whole.”

Something—either the conversation or the milky green liquor—is giving Gordon a thudding case of *déjà vu*. He worries that the absinthe will send him into a *grand mal* seizure, or something worse, the instant it touches his lips. Quietly, he asks Lloyd: “It won’t make me go blind, will it?”

“On the contrary,” Lloyd says, “it’ll help you to see. You’ll be able to peer at the world through the eyes of van Gogh. I understand he painted ‘Starry Night’ while he was hopped up on this stuff.”

“Was that before or after he cut off his ear?”

“Who gives a rat’s ass? ‘The Starry Night’ is worth any number of bloody ears. So drink up! You’re in illustrious company. Absinthe was the favored drink of Picasso, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Edgar Allen Poe.”

“Also Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Alfred Jarry,” Gordon appends, recalling his childhood immersion in French literature.

“Who’s Alfred Jarry?” Lloyd asks him, stumped for once.

“A pistol-packing midget who scandalized Paris around the turn of the century with a play he’d written called ‘Ubu Roi.’ It’s about this fat, crazed, scatological king who keeps his conscience in a suitcase. Actually, he kind of reminds me of you.”

“Ha! At least you’re not afraid to speak your mind,” Lloyd grins. “Just like my nephew, that charismatic little shit.... Well then, to King

Ubu!” he toasts, tapping his glass against Gordon’s. As Lloyd gulps down the emerald liquid, his squinty eyes boggle. “Holy cats, that’s good...” he mutters.

Seeing Lloyd drink, Gordon decides it’s safe enough to take a drink of his own. The first sip is bitter, weedy, with a hint of licorice. It’s instantly familiar, like something he’s drunk before—although he can’t remember where or when. *Maybe in a past life*, he thinks to himself. He sips again—takes more of a slurp, really, or a greedy swallow. Gordon has a feeling he and the Green Fairy will soon be getting along like old friends.

“Now, what were we talking about? Oh, yes... the Templars as materialists!” Lloyd eyes his half-empty glass as if it’s a crystal ball. “It’s true that after the fall of Acre in 1291, public opinion seemed to turn against the Order, just as it had in 1187 after the failure of the Second Crusade, when Saladin beheaded 230 Templar knights at the Battle of Hattin and ousted them from Jerusalem. People were asking why God had failed to intervene on the ‘Templars’ behalf while the Mameluks were eradicating them from the Holy Land; they wondered: *Had the Templars fallen out of God’s favor?* Christian priests left behind had been massacred; nuns forced into prostitution. It made for bad press. And it didn’t help that the Templars back in Europe were so fucking rich. *Why couldn’t all that wealth buy them victory?* Vicious rumors began to circulate: *The Templars had sunk into indolence and depravity; in fact, they were treasonous; they’d sold the Holy Land back to the Muslims in secret negotiations and fled to Cypress with their ill-gotten riches; meanwhile, the rest of them were hiding out in their far-flung commanderies, living like sultans....* Well, you get the picture. From there, it’s only a short step to accusations of apostasy and ass-banditry.”

“People were just jealous,” Gordon says, setting his empty glass on Lloyd’s desk. He *loves* the Templars right at that moment. They had *balls*. Other people just sat around bitching while the Templars went off to fight the noble fight on foreign soil. *Fuck those small-minded fucks back at home!* So what if God hadn’t always made it easy for them? At least the Templars had the courage to actually go out and *do* something, unlike those chicken-shit complainers. And so what if they hung out with the Assassins and blew hash smoke up the tiny pink

assholes of cute fluffy kittens and sang liturgies to a decapitated demon. At least they weren't boring.

"Another absinthe?" Lloyd asks.

"Sure—why not..." Gordon says. He's feeling magnanimous... and oddly furry, like tiny green nerve filaments are sprouting from his skin and waving about like the shy tendrils of a sea anemone.

"What happened to the Templars in prison is almost too sad and tedious to go into," Lloyd says, mixing a second drink of his own. "The Inquisition's methods were brutal. Two- or three-dozen men died at their hands from torture and suffering. Knights were stretched on the rack until their joints ripped from the sockets. Others had their feet basted in fat, then held over flames until their bones fell out. Three cardinals visiting Jacques de Molay behind bars were horrified to see large patches of skin ripped from his back and stomach. Molay revoked his confession in front of the cardinals and begged to receive justice from the Pope. But by then it was too late. Word of the Grand Master's confession had spread, encouraging other Templars to make confessions of their own. To give just one well-documented example: of the 138 Templars arrested in Paris, 134 had admitted to some or all of the charges against them. Retracting those confessions would be dangerous. Under the statutes of the Inquisition, anyone who later revoked their confession was considered a relapsed heretic, and heretics were burned alive at the stake. It didn't matter that those confessions had been obtained under torture. Truly, once the Inquisition had you in its clutches, you were in a 'damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't' situation."

Gordon unexpectedly finds himself tearing up. *Why is the world so full of angry, self-righteous assholes?* Everywhere you look you find deluded hypocrites, bent on persecution. A greedy King, a two-faced Pope, an evil genius lawyer, smug Inquisitors who get off on sadism—those poor, screwed-over Templars never stood a chance. But it's not just them. It's the fast-talking Wall Street powerbrokers, the television evangelists, and the trailer trash rednecks that always vote Republican, even though it's not in their own best interests. Why are *they* always looking to take advantage of *us*?—the honest, hard-working folks who just want to be decent and kind.

“Life on this planet is so fucked-up,” Gordon says, summarizing his thoughts.

“Amen to that, brother,” says Lloyd, fussing over Gordon’s empty glass. He pours another three fingers of absinthe and does his alchemy with the spoon and sugar again. “‘To live is to suffer,’ as the Buddhists are so fond of saying. It’s never been a picnic. In the Middle Ages we had warring religions, the Inquisition, and the Black Plague. In this century we’ve had warring nation-states, concentration camps, and now AIDS, the so-called ‘Gay Plague’—which will turn out to be a much bigger problem than most people realize.”

“I thought AIDS just killed homosexuals,” says Gordon, taking the proffered drink from Lloyd.

“As if that’s not bad enough!” Lloyd scowls. “But it’s going to cross over, mutate, just you watch.... Thanks to the maleficent powers-that-be, our brief era of the zipless fuck is already done for.”

“Wait a second... you’re saying AIDS was planned? *How?*”

“It’s supposed to have got its start from some man fucking a monkey in deepest, darkest Africa. How’s that for a backhanded slap at Darwinism? But don’t you believe it. AIDS was intended, spread by vaccinations. The suffering of humanity is intended. There are others who *feed* off our suffering. They grow strong on it.”

“Lloyd, you’re freaking me out...” Gordon says, taking a big slurp of absinthe.

“Think of the Templars,” says Lloyd, “and their absolutely amazing capacity for self-slaughter. The Templar Rule forbade them to leave the battlefield unless they were outnumbered three-to-one—and they managed to live up to that. They paid with their lives accordingly. Then they stepped almost willingly into King Philip’s evil snare and submitted to years of torture and abuse that culminated in many of them being burned alive at the stake. But the Templars knew something... they weren’t just unwitting dupes. They had something on the Holy See—something which fomented their initial rocket-ride to wealth and power, and later, their equally precipitous fall.”

“So what are we talking about here? The Holy Grail? The Ark of the Covenant?” Gordon, like everyone else, has seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and he knows what Indiana Jones had to say about all that junk.

But he's pretty sure Lloyd won't be giving him the Spielberg/Lucas-approved version of events.

"If you think it was something the Templars found during their excavations under the Temple Mount, you'd be right," Lloyd says, "but it wasn't what you might expect. There was no treasure. The original Temple built by King Solomon had been sacked and looted by the Sumerian King Nebuchadrezzar and his legions in the summer of 586 BC. After Herod the Great went to all the trouble of rebuilding it, the Temple was destroyed once again by Titus in 70 AD. All valuables were plundered in both instances, of course. So there was no Holy Grail left for the Templars to find, whether it be Christ's Cup from the Last Supper or documents pertaining to the secret bloodline—*Le Serpent Rouge*—of the Merovingian kings who were supposed to have been descended from the union of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. They *probably* didn't find the embalmed head of John the Baptist there, either, although that used to be my favorite theory. It would go a long way toward explaining the mystery of Baphomet. You remember what happened to John after Salome did her little dance for her step-daddy Herod, don't you?... The Mandaeans of Iraq believed John was the true messiah, rather than Jesus, as did the Johannites, who further believed that Christ or his disciples had assassinated John so they could take over his flock. That belief, by the way, was called the Great Heresy. Some say it was a belief that even Leonardo da Vinci secretly held. As for why the Templars referred to the head as Baphomet, I've read that it derives from the Greek words 'Baphe' and 'Metis'. The two words combined translate as 'Baptism of Wisdom'—which would fit."

Gordon's head is reeling. He's not sure whether it's from the absinthe or Lloyd's manic recitation of legends and facts, but he's definitely feeling a bit more confused than usual. *Mary Magdalene and Jesus had a baby? Who knew? Baphomet is the mummified head of John the Baptist? Cool!*

"How can you be sure of anything when it happened over eight hundred years ago?" he asks Lloyd.

"How can I be sure? Because there are levels of initiation beyond the 33 degrees of Freemasonry's Scottish Rite. Levels I didn't even know existed until I was told I was going higher." Lloyd gets a misty look in his beady eyes. "I was flown to Paris first-class and put up in a

lavish hotel with a balcony overlooking the Ile-des-Javiaux. That's the tiny island in the Seine where Jacques de Molay and Geoffroi de Charney were burned at the stake after they renounced their confessions, once and for all, at a public trial held on March 18th, 1314, following the dissolution of the Order. It's been said that Molay uttered a curse as the flames consumed him, demanding that his persecutors join him in front of God's tribunal before the year was over. Pope Clement died 33 days later. Near the same time, Guillaume de Nogaret, that wet rat of a lawyer, was found dead of poison with his tongue horribly stuck out. King Philip was killed in a gruesome hunting accident several months after that. So you could say that God—or the Devil—avenged the Templars on Jacques de Molay's behalf. By the way, I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but there's a Masonic youth club known as The Order of Jacques de Molay. Jimmy has belonged to it ever since he was little."

"I know," Gordon says, recalling his ill-fated experience with the Tree House Order of Jacques de Molay. "Jimmy tried to get me to join when I was seven."

"He did?"

"Yeah. He almost killed me in the process."

"That's odd..." Lloyd says, pursing his thin lips. "Human sacrifice isn't ordinarily required until one reaches the uppermost levels."

Human *what*? "What the... *fuck* are you talking about?" Gordon asks, spilling absinthe down the front of his chin.

"What I'm about to tell you can never leave this room," Lloyd says, pushing back in his chair. The tin umbrella's shadow completely engulfs him again. "If you tell anyone what I'm about to tell you—and I mean *anyone at all*—your life will be in danger. Now, are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Hell yeah..." Gordon says. With that kind of a build-up, how could he possibly refuse? Besides, he's feeling no fear at the moment. He's drunker than he's ever been.

"What I learned during my further initiations at the Grande Loge de France, I'm not allowed to speak of," Lloyd says. "But I *will* tell you what I learned at the Grande Orient de France regarding Templar history. And that will give you clues to all the rest."

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

Get off your high horse, you pompous, blubbery fuck, Gordon thinks almost out loud. *You've been stringing me along all night, you bastard. I want answers. Now!*

"When the original nine Templars were tunneling under the Temple Mount," says Lloyd, in storyteller mode, "they came across an older tunnel—one that had been there for many hundreds, if not thousands of years. This tunnel led to miles of larger tunnels that went deeper and deeper underground. Some of those tunnels led to chambers full of human bones. In one such chamber, the Templars encountered a doorway sheathed by a curtain of writhing blue flame. The doorway overwhelmed them with an atavistic sense of dread. Beyond it seemed nothing but a slathering chthonic maw. Fearful though they were, Hugh de Payens held up his lantern and dared to pass through the fiery curtain. He was met on the other side by the inhabitants of a strange and opulent subterranean world—ancients who'd once ruled the cities and skies above. They could communicate with Hugh in his own language and they welcomed him as a brother. And that's how the Templars first encountered the Anunnaki."

"Oh God, that is... *such bullshit!* What are you, like, Jules Verne all of a sudden? H.P.-fucking-Lovecraft?" At some level, Gordon knows he's attacking Lloyd with the sarcasm of someone who's incredibly shit-faced, but he can't stop himself. "Who're the Anunnaki then? A bunch of space aliens? Morlocks? Bigfoot? I mean, *c'mon...*"

Inside the darkness created by the big red umbrella, Lloyd seems as imperturbable as a giant clam. "You're reacting so vehemently because your programmed belief system is being challenged," he says. "I call this extraterrestrial species the Anunnaki because that was the name given to them by the ancient Sumerians. It translates as 'Those Who Came to Earth from Heaven.' Sumer, in case you don't know, occupied the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers about fifty-five hundred years ago in what is now known as southern Iraq. It was the site of the world's first civilization, if you're gullible enough to believe the standard history books. But do a little digging and I think you'll find that the Anunnaki turn up in just about every culture's creation myths. You can recognize them by their names and symbols, which usually appear as serpents or dragons. They're known as the Nagas of India and Tibet, the Djedhi of Egypt, the Lung Wangs of

China, and the Neifelheim of Scandinavia. In Mesoamerica, where we know them best, they were called Kulkukán—or Quetzalcoatl.”

“Plumed Serpent,” Gordon translates, calmer now. “So, basically, you’re saying the Anunnaki are a bunch of feathered lizard dudes.”

“Close. Actually, they’re more amphibious. They have a humanoid form, with a serpent’s facial features and moist, scaly, greenish-black skin. That’s why they choose to live underground—it’s much easier on the epidermis. Some of them have adapted to a life of almost total darkness. That sub-race has shrunk to the size of pygmies. Their pupils have grown large and their skin has turned pale and ashen. They’re known as the ‘Greys,’ the aliens who seem so intent on abducting people and tickling them with anal probes these days. The Anunnaki, who live much closer to the Earth’s surface, have kept their skin’s original dark pigmentation. It helps protect them from the sun. They’re the ones who learned how to shape-shift and commandeer human bodies. They also, long ago, mixed their DNA with human genes, producing alien-human hybrids with elongated craniums, protruding stomachs, and thin arms. You can see it in depictions of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten and his daughters. In that regard, they were known as the Nefilim, the so-called ‘sons of God’ in *Genesis* who ‘went to the daughters of men and had children by them.’ The Bible tells us the offspring of those lewd interspecies couplings were ‘the heroes of old, men of renown.’”

A mental snapshot of D.H. in his raccoon fur jacket and purple pimp hat flits through Gordon’s mind as he says: “Lloyd, babes, you a muthafuckin’ wild man.”

“Thank you for that earthy compliment,” Lloyd replies from the shadows. *Jesus*, Gordon thinks, *he sounds just like Orson Welles*. “I want to make one thing clear before we move on. The Anunnaki have been here on Earth for hundreds of thousands of years—and they weren’t the only ones. There was another extraterrestrial species that first landed in the north, the so-called ‘Nordic’-types. They were more like us. They had long blonde hair, intense—almost electric—blue eyes, and pearly white skin. And they were very tall, like your father, well over six feet. The symbols most associated with them are wings—whether angel wings or dragon wings—and birds in general, most often the Phoenix. As you might guess from the Scandinavian term

‘Neifelheim,’ the Nordic aliens were also lumped in the category of Nefilim, which has variously been translated as ‘giants’ or ‘Those Who Were Cast Down.’ They were also ‘the Watchers’ from the apocryphal text called *The Book of Enoch*. As I’m sure you understand by now, the Bible is nothing but a hodgepodge of dubious translations and retellings of old histories and myths from diverse cultures. Specifically, the Old Testament relies heavily on the ancient recorded history of Sumer and Babylon (the names have changed but the stories remain the same), and the New Testament is a rehashing of the Sun God myths earlier personified by Mithras, Osiris, and Attis, among others.”

“Holy shit! Has the Moral Majority found out about this? I’m sure Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham will have something to say about it.” Gordon doesn’t necessarily *like* being a smartass, but sometimes he just can’t help it.

“All religious zealots, of any stripe, are the unknowing prison guards of society, but let’s not get into that just now....” Lloyd groans as if he’s suffering from a sudden stomachache. “I want you to understand more about the Nordic aliens, because you’re obviously related to them. They were at war with the Anunnaki long before they arrived on Earth. They were sent here to supervise without interfering. They were very wise and benevolent, if somewhat aloof. They didn’t share the Anunnaki’s reptilian instinct for territoriality and dominance. They had the same characteristics we attribute to angels. The Nordic aliens did, however, have one fatal flaw: They got horny. They, too, ‘went to the daughters of men and had children by them’ and those children became vulnerable to the Anunnaki.”

“I guess if I was an angel sent down here to watch over stuff, I might get bored and horny enough to want a little human poontang, too,” says Gordon, trying to identify with his Nordic alien ancestors. Dizzy, he thinks to himself, *I hope I don’t pass out....*

“Now all this happened hundreds of thousands of years ago,” Lloyd reminds him. “Most of it took place on the lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria. The hybrid children of the Nordic aliens grew to maturity. Some of them bred with other humans and their Nordic alien genes spread throughout the human population. But some of the other hybrid children were abducted and raped by the Anunnaki, and the offspring from those violent encounters became the race known as the

Aryans. So you see, Hitler was onto something, after all.... The Aryans, as a rule, retained the more human features of their Nordic alien ancestors, but they also acquired some of the dominant reptilian traits from the Anunnaki DNA, making them prone to cruelty, selfishness, and malice. The Anunnaki strove to keep this bloodline pure. Human beings have a natural aversion to mating with reptilians, as do the Nordic aliens, of course. If it hadn't been for the enforced breeding programs among the captive Nordic alien-human hybrids, the Anunnaki genes never would have gained a foothold. But that breeding did indeed occur. The resulting bloodline was the true *Serpent Rouge*—the red serpent, or serpent blood—passed down through generations of Merovingian kings with their fabled long blonde hair. That breeding is also why you'll find Aztec descriptions of Quetzalcoatl as a white man."

"The plumed serpent..." Gordon says again, getting it. "They combined the bird symbolism of the Nordic aliens with the snake symbolism of the Anunnaki."

"Right. You'll also find those two symbols combined in the caduceus," Lloyd points out. "Two snakes spiraling upward on a winged staff, just like the double-helical structure of our DNA as discovered by Crick and Watson in 1953. We associate it now with medicine, but the caduceus was originally a symbol of commerce that first appeared in Sumer around the same time that construction started on the Great Pyramid at Giza. Hermes and Mercury carried the caduceus to identify themselves as divine messengers. It allowed them to travel unmolested wherever they chose to go. Cybele, Enki, and Anubis each had one, too. The caduceus also has a connection to Kundalini yoga, which awakens the 'serpent power' coiled at the base of our spines. In other words, Kundalini awakens the occult alien powers, like telekinesis and telepathy, which lay dormant in our reptilian DNA."

Powers that could levitate and kill a brown Doberman pinscher? Gordon wants to ask, but he doesn't—because Lloyd is still talking:

"The spiraling snakes of the caduceus are thought to represent the two main subtle nerve channels (the 'ida' and 'pingala') that travel up the spine and central nervous system, crisscrossing each other at the seven major chakra points. The wings represent the two lobes of the

brain—or the enlightened mind, freed from the shackles of mundane reality. But that’s taking us rather far afield.”

“Yeah, let’s get back to Quetzalcoatl,” says Gordon. “I had no idea the Aztecs thought he was a white guy.”

“That’s why Cortez had such an easy time of it when he came ashore to conquer them. The Aztecs thought he was Quetzalcoatl returning as promised. In Aztec legends, Quetzalcoatl was much like Christ. He was the god of the Morning Star and the patron saint of priests. He was said to have given the Aztecs corn to grow and he invented their calendar and books. Then he died and was resurrected. Like Christ, he promised to return someday, probably in the same ‘flying boat’ he first rode in on. In all likelihood, the true Quetzalcoatl was a leader of the Aryans who came from a relatively undiluted bloodline of Anunnaki-Nordic genes.”

“Why didn’t the Anunnaki just rule the Aztecs themselves?”

“They did—from beneath the Earth’s surface. See, you have to understand... the Anunnaki (and the Nordics, as well) have been evolving for millions of years. Think of how far our civilization has advanced in only the last two millennia. Of course, a large part of what we accomplished was just back-engineering of rediscovered ancient alien technology, but nevertheless—a jumbo jet would look quite impressive to a 1st-century man who’s only ridden on donkeys up until then. Now multiply that rate of technological progress exponentially. The Anunnaki have learned how to possess human bodies and make them do their bidding. I think they do it by holographic projection, although I’m not certain as to their exact methods. What I *do* know for sure is that it requires the host to be carrying a specific gene that only appears in Anunnaki-bred neural DNA.”

“I remember reading somewhere that a single strand of neural DNA can act like an antenna that picks up the broadcast signal for the whole entire holographic universe.” Gordon is too drunk to consider the full implications of that statement. What he really needs to do is sit down. There isn’t another chair in Lloyd’s office, so he sits on the floor.

“That kind of thinking begs the question: ‘How do I trust my senses when my senses are nothing but a constant stream of

mathematical algorithms—or, to be more precise, *Fourier transforms*—being broadcast to me from parts unknown?’ Let’s not go there....”

“Okay.” Gordon burps.

“The Anunnaki live in a vast subterranean network of tunnels and caverns that honeycomb the Earth’s crust,” Lloyd tells Gordon. “Passageways into that labyrinthine world are hidden in the Andes, the Himalayas, Egypt, Greece, Malta, Angkor, Britain, France, China, and under Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, among other places. There are tunnels under the Aztec temples that lead to chambers full of bones just like the Templars found. It’s no mere coincidence that the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán used the royal cubit as its unit of measurement, as did the Great Pyramid at Giza, along with other ancient structures throughout the world. They were all built under the supervision of the Anunnaki.”

“Did they build Disneyland, too?”

“They had a hand in it, along with the Stanford Research Institute...” Lloyd says, barely pausing, “but let me finish what I was about to tell you in regard to Teotihuacán. It was the largest city in Mesoamerica 2,000 years ago. When the Aztecs rediscovered it some 1400 years later, the first thing they did was conduct massive human sacrifices at the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. The skeletons of over 200 men and women were found there laid out in neat rows. Some scholars now estimate that in the waning years of the Aztec Empire, before the conquistadors arrived to rout them, as many as 250 *thousand* Aztec lives were being sacrificed annually. I was told by a very trustworthy source that those sacrifices were made at the behest of the Anunnaki, who emerged from their blue flame-sheathed doorways beneath the temples and feasted on the spilt blood. It was the same story during the First Crusade—remember how the crusaders fighting at the mosques on Temple Mount waded in blood up to their ankles? That’s why they were victorious, even though they were hugely outnumbered. They were willing to pay the blood tribute to the Anunnaki, while the occupying Muslims at the time were not. Historically, wherever you find serpent worship, you’re also likely to find human sacrifices—and often *cannibalism*. Starting a war that kills millions of people means nothing to the Anunnaki. They think no more of it than we think of

the thousands of cows, sheep, and pigs we slaughter each day to feed ourselves.”

“You’re a sick man, Lloyd...” Gordon says. Actually, *he’s* the one who’s going to be sick. Very sick, very soon.

“The Anunnaki use blood as fuel to maintain control over their human puppets. They also feed on human fear. Fear and hatred connects us to them—maybe by way of that neural antenna you mentioned earlier. The more we can be manipulated to project any sort of distorted negative emotions, the more energy they can absorb and use against us. The Anunnaki want us to crave fortune and fame—those are the carrots they use to get us to do their bidding—but more than that, they want us to crave abjection. They want us to fight their wars, put ourselves in demeaning situations, get addicted to drugs and alcohol, get angry, get divorced. Most of all, they want us to die painful, horrific deaths. Now do you begin to understand why the Templars rose to power and were so utterly decimated? They were furthering the Anunnaki agenda. The Assassins? Same thing. There was an Anunnaki lair under the fortress at Alamut.”

“What about Kingsburg?” Gordon asks. He’s half-joking, but if there *is* more bad news, Lloyd might as well give it to him all at once.

“You’re a bright boy...” says Lloyd standing up from behind his desk, “I thought you might have figured that out by now. Kingsburg—the *Swedish* Village—has some of the purest Nordic alien-human bloodlines anywhere outside of Scandinavia. The Aryans have to replenish their own gene pool with the purer Nordic bloodlines from time to time or they start looking too reptilian. That’s why I live here, even though I have the kind of money that would allow me to live anywhere in the world: Kingsburg is a prime breeding ground.”

The ceiling is whirling down on Gordon like a slow circus ride. He lies flat on his back so gravity can do a better job of holding him to the floor. Lloyd appears in his field of vision, leaning over him—his fat red face scarily upside-down.

“Your father came from that very pure bloodline,” the upside-down Lloyd says. “He didn’t have the Anunnaki neural gene that would allow him to be controlled, so the Anunnaki had no use for him, aside from breeding purposes. They were never going to let him become the Hoo-Hoo Club’s Snark of the Universe. They control the

people at the top levels of all the world's secret societies—and by that route they also control the highest levels in government, finance, big business, big media, big religion, organized crime, and the military, as well. So you see... after the conception of your brother, Derek, your father's work was done."

Lloyd leans in even closer. To his horrified amazement, Gordon thinks he sees the flicker of a purple forked tongue. "But your *mother*... well, she's Aryan." Lloyd grins. "She, like me, would like nothing better than to drink your blood."



The following morning, waking feels to Gordon like being dropped out the other side of a black hole. At first, he doesn't know where he is. A giant black cat seems to be lapping milk from an enchanted pond somewhere near his head. *Ssslurk, slurp, slurp*.... Opening his eyes, Gordon finds himself on the floor next to his own bed. The air purifier under his nightstand is running out of water—that's the cause of the slurping noise, so wet and sinister on this surreal morning, like an anteater sucking saliva through its long, tubular tongue. Gordon is surprised to discover he's still wearing his clothes from the previous night. Double-checking, he's relieved to see they're not covered with vomit. *What did I do?* a tiny voice asks within him. He doesn't have much of an answer.

He's still drunk. Drunk in that *It's-morning-the-sun-is-out-I-shouldn't-be-drunk* sort of way that portends many long and difficult hours to come. He's incredibly thirsty. He wants to go stick his head under the faucet in the bathroom sink and drink deep, but he's not sure he can stand up yet. Puking is still a very real possibility. And what if he runs into his mother or his Uncle Gerald out there? They're sure to be pissed off at him for staying out so late. *How did I get home?* he wonders. His memory of last night is hazy. Gordon remembers the party, remembers talking about the Templars with Lloyd in his office (*man, that seemed to go on forever...*), and he remembers Lloyd bringing out his evil green bottle of absinthe. But after that—*nothing*. He must have blacked out.

Gordon recalls a dream he was having just before he woke up. A very unsettling dream. He was walking through a primeval forest with a man whose face he couldn't see. They came to a giant toppled tree with its huge root system ripped halfway out of the black, fertile ground. It was Yggdrasil, the World Tree. Gordon thought he saw the face of the Old Testament God in the pattern of the tree's bark. He pointed it out to the man, but the man didn't seem to be interested. Maybe it was just a trick of the light. At the same time, however, Gordon heard a voice saying, "*God is on his knees.*" They walked over to the tree's upended root system, where the voice had emanated. A deep hole was there where the roots had torn loose from the soil. Gordon saw multi-colored laser beams crisscrossing at the far end of the hole. The man told him the laser beams were part of a high-tech alarm system. He said they could dig beneath the laser beams with their hands and if they were careful not to interrupt the lasers' paths, they could get to a treasure on the other side. So they started digging. The laser beams rose above them and fell behind as they dug deeper. In the end, just a few pale green absinthe beams remained and Gordon was able to squeeze past them into a cavern. From there, he embarked on a journey to the underworld. The dream became a little murky at that point. He vaguely recalled some sort of an awards ceremony later, during which he was congratulated by the recently deceased actor, Henry Fonda, the star of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Then he woke up with his reality-warping hangover.

What I really need is a shower, thinks Gordon. To that end, he crawls up on the bed and shrugs out of his clothes. Waging an internal dogfight with dizziness and nausea, he manages to put on a pair of pajama bottoms and sneak down the hall to the bathroom. *I'm safe,* he thinks as he curls up in a ball under the shower's warm jets. *I'll just stay in here for a few hours, drinking water and barfing until I feel better. Maybe I'll even jack off later.*

But there's no chance of that. His mother knocks on the door, shouting, "Get a move on, Gordon! If you don't hurry up, you'll be late!"

He'd completely forgotten: it's a school day.



“Man, you were so fucked up!” D.H. says, laughing, as Gordon nurses a carton of orange juice at lunch. He imitates Gordon’s voice, hysteric and slurred, “The Green Fairy and the nookie! *An nah nookie!*”

“Dude, you weren’t making any sense at all,” Skip says, patting him on the back. “Hey, um... you’re not gonna throw up on us, are you?”

Gordon shakes his head. Wearing a hangdog expression and still battling waves of nausea, he sits at a cafeteria table with D.H., Skip, Twinker, and Jimmy. Hideous took the day off, apparently; he’s not in school. Gordon wishes now that he’d had as much sense.

“How did I get home?” he asks, curious.

“Hideous drove you,” D.H. says. “We threw you in back because we were afraid you’d puke all over everything, but you passed out instead. Your bedroom window was open a crack when we got to your house, so we just pushed you through and left.”

“It’s amazing you held it all down,” Jimmy says. “Lloyd said you drank like half a bottle of gin.”

It was absinthe, Gordon thinks, wondering why Lloyd would lie about that. *Maybe because it’s illegal...*

“That fat pig didn’t try to put the moves on you, did he?” asks Twinker. “Because if he did, I’ll kill him.”

“No, we were just talking about the Templars and some other weird shit.”

“Did he tell you about his talk with Buzz Aldrin?” Jimmy asks.

“No. What about it?”

“Lloyd’s company insures rockets,” Jimmy tells everyone. “Lloyd’s one of their main guys, so he’s always hanging around NASA and JPL, checking stuff out. One day he ran into Buzz Aldrin, the second guy who walked on the Moon.”

“Yeah, we know who Buzz Aldrin is. Jeez...” says Skip.

“Okay, so anyway... Buzz Aldrin had stopped being an astronaut and had kind of turned into an alcoholic, so they went out for a few beers. And Buzz got a little *bugged* and started telling Lloyd this wild-ass story. He said that right after they’d landed *Apollo 11* on the Moon,

they saw two huge UFOs pull up right across from them on the other side of a crater.”

“No way!” says D.H., meaning, *I knew it all along!*

“Yeah, it’s totally nuts, right? Buzz swore he radioed Mission Control and told them about the UFOs right away, but the transmission got censored so the public couldn’t hear it. But I guess a bunch of ham radio operators picked it up on their own special VHF station that bypassed the normal NASA broadcasting lines, so people know what he said. He was all freaked out by it. “These babies are huge!” he kept saying. And then he told Lloyd we were warned off the Moon. That’s why no one’s ever gone back there since 1972. It’s also why they built Skylab instead of a Moon base like they’d planned, which would’ve made a hell of a lot more sense.”

“I’m not buyin’ any of this,” Skip says to Jimmy. “I think your uncle’s full of shit. I could tell right away, the first time I met him.”

“Was that before or after he saw you and Twinker doing it doggy-style up on his roof?”

Twinker bursts out laughing. Her face turns bright red. “You know about that?” she asks. “*See?*” she says to Skip. “I told you people could see us.”

“Yeah, but didn’t the Moon look beautiful?” Skip romantically takes her hand and caresses it against his stubbly cheek.

Jimmy says, “Lloyd’s seen classified photos of the far side of the Moon, and he says there’s buildings there that look just like the ruins of ancient temples built by the Aztecs down in Tijuana.”

“There aren’t any Aztec temples in Tijuana, Jimmy,” Gordon says, but the hair on the back of his neck is standing up. He has a creeping feeling of *déjà vu*.

“Yeah, well, it was Teo-*something*...” says Jimmy. “He also thinks the Moon is hollow in places. Supposedly, after *Apollo 12*’s used up lunar module booster dropped off on the Moon’s surface, seismic sensors left behind by *Apollo 11* recorded that the Moon rang like a gong for over an hour. It’d only do that if it was hollowed out inside. Maybe aliens live in there.”

“Yeah, and maybe blue monkeys will fly out my butt if I click my ruby red heels together,” Skip says.

"Jimmy, your uncle is a seriously twisted man," says Twinker.

"I'll admit, he's got some strange ideas, but he's basically been a cool guy to me," Jimmy says. "Like, whenever I do something stupid, like puke in his antique Chinese vase, he never bawls me out. He just says, 'It's food for the Moon, Jimmy, food for the Moon...'"

"Like I said, the man's a fucking freak."

"He wants us to go by that Petrossian guy's office and sign some paperwork after school today," Jimmy says. "For that insurance deal we talked about."

"I'm still not sure that's such a good idea," Gordon says, fighting off a panicky wave of nausea.

"Why not? It won't cost us anything."

"Yeah, dude..." Skip chimes in. "And then at least if you die from one of your massive hangovers someday, we'll all make out from it. You'd do that much for your friends, wouldn't you?"

"Friends who saved your ass from getting busted by sneaking you in through your bedroom window while you were passed out," D.H. reminds Gordon.

"Don't put so much pressure on him," says Twinker.

The lunch bell rings. The cafeteria starts to clear out.

"Okay, I guess I'll go along with it," Gordon says, putting his head in his hands. "I mean, what the hell, right?"

"Sweet!" says Jimmy. "Let's all meet in the parking lot after class."



On the way to Mr. Petrossian's insurance office in the blue 1966 Ford Mustang that Jimmy's mother signed over to him on his sixteenth birthday, Gordon, Skip, D.H., and Twinker are entertained by Jimmy's retelling of another one of Lloyd's stories. It's the story of a man named Jack Whiteside Parsons, the co-founder of a rocket research group at Cal Tech that eventually turned into the Jet Propulsion Laboratory—NASA's premier rocket science center.

Jack Parsons was a bold, intrepid, self-taught science guy who made some important breakthroughs in the development of solid

rocket fuels during the 1930s and '40s. He put the "JP" in JPL with his work in jet-propulsion-assisted take-offs, which allowed military aircraft to use shorter runways. There's a statue of him at JPL ("Jack Parsons' Lab" some people there call it...). There's also a crater on the dark side of the Moon named in his honor. But the really interesting thing about Jack Parsons, aside from those accomplishments, was that he sincerely believed he was the Antichrist and he was doing everything he could think of to bring on the Apocalypse.

Sometime around World War II, Parsons got mixed-up with a secret society known as the Ordo Templi Orientis (Order of the Oriental Templars, or OTO)—an offshoot of Freemasonry that practiced ritual magick techniques borrowed from eastern mysticism. The famous drug fiend, British intelligence agent, and devil-worshipping sex maniac, Aleister Crowley, happened to be Grand Master General of the Ordo Templi Orientis in those days. He'd personally singled out Jack Parsons to become the new leader of the OTO's California lodge.

By 1946, bored with rockets, Parsons was living by Crowley's Thelemic Law, summed up as "Do What Thou Wilt"—a corollary to Hasan bin Sabbah's "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." There was quite a lot of occult experimentation going on with Parsons waving around his Magick Rood—or more simply, his boner. Parsons was assisted in these experiments by his Scribe—a young, tubby, not particularly handsome megalomaniac by the name of L. Ron Hubbard, who was on medical leave from the Navy for a stress-related condition induced by firing heavy artillery at Mexican sunbathers and writing bad science fiction.

All that magickal jerking off somehow helped the two Thelemic bad boys attract a foxy redheaded girl from Iowa named Marjorie Elizabeth Cameron—who probably had no idea of what she was getting into. Jack Parsons wanted to conceive a Moonchild with her, a sort of homunculus that would serve as a physical incarnation for the Great Whore of Babylon. Amazingly, Cameron went along with the idea. She and Parsons had a whole lot of ritual sex while reciting invocations from *The Keys of Enoch* written by John Dee, the Elizabethan magus. Hubbard presumably watched. The Moonchild was supposed to grow up to be a Thelemic messiah who would preside

over the End of Days. But Parsons must have been shooting satanic blanks, because Cameron didn't get pregnant.

Things fell apart rather quickly for Jack Parsons after that. Hubbard ran off to Florida with nearly all of Parsons' money and his former lover, Sara Northrup (the slutty little sister of Parsons' first wife, Helen; Sara later became Hubbard's second wife, even though Hubbard was still married at the time to *his* first wife, Margaret "Polly" Grubb, with whom he'd fathered two children). Following that debacle, the FBI started spying on Parsons. As a result, he lost his government security clearance and got kicked out of the rocket industry. He ended up working at a gas station. Finally, in June of 1952, while Parsons was fooling around in a makeshift rocket fuel lab inside his garage, the whole place blew up. Whether it was murder or an accident, no one could say for certain, but the launch countdown was definitely over for Jack Parsons, Rocket-Building Antichrist—he'd had his fiery liftoff.

While those events might come across as a rather severe series of setbacks, actually, according to Lloyd, the ritual fuck magick of Parsons, Cameron, and Hubbard—what they'd called *The Babalon Working*—had been a stellar success. They'd opened an interdimensional energy portal for the Great Old Ones and something had slouched through it. To Lloyd's way of thinking, it was no mere coincidence that Kenneth Arnold had spotted the first American flying saucers (nine of them) skipping across the clouds above Mt. Rainier on June 24th, 1947, just as Parsons and Cameron were finishing up their Enochian sex tricks. The Roswell Crash happened several days later, on the Fourth of July, and lurid accounts of alien abductions—with impartial use of anal probes on both out-of-work lumberjacks and juicy high school majorettes—have been occurring at a furious pace ever since. It was also worth noting that Aleister Crowley died that same year and L. Ron Hubbard was inspired to write his book called *Dianetics* not long afterward (with Sara Northrup's help). Hubbard then went on to found the Church of Scientology, which teaches ordinary people wearing Dacron slacks and polyester-blend blazers how to become Operating Thetans. And Thetans—again, according to Lloyd—are the closest things we have on Earth to aliens walking around inside human flesh.

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And how does Lloyd know all this? Like his hero Jack Parsons, Lloyd belongs to the Ordo Templi Orientis, too, of course....



Mr. Petrossian turns out to be a meek little guy wearing a cheap gray suit and round wire-rimmed glasses. He shows Gordon, Jimmy, Skip, D.H., and Twinker into his Conference Room (a hastily dry-walled back office with florescent lighting) where they all sit down in standard-issue folding chairs set up around a beat-up laminated walnut table. Mr. Petrossian commends them on having the foresight to start planning for their future at such a young age. He's very sorry that he can't offer coverage to Twinker, due to her medical condition, but the rest of them have already checked out and everything's set to go. As he passes around some papers for them to sign, Gordon thinks to himself, *Petrosian, you sorry bastard... you seem like a nice-enough guy, but there's no way in hell you're coming out on the right side of this deal.*

Then again, he thinks, neither are we. The way Gordon sees it, they're signing their own death warrants.



That story Lloyd told about the Anunnaki is actually a pretty good description of how the Archons work within the Dark Brotherhood. Except for the lizard part. I don't know where Lloyd got that. Like daimons, Archons can manifest in any way they choose. So you've got the Good (daimons), the Bad (Archons), and the Ugly (Lloyd and the other Dark Brothers of his ilk...).

Maybe the reptilian slant to Lloyd's story is just a case of like resonating with like. After all, every human being shares some of the same genetic codes with reptiles. In fact, if you've ever run across Paul MacLean's triune brain theory, you'll know that the human brain is actually three-brains-in-one. The oldest part of the brain (the brain stem and cerebellum) is known as the reptilian brain, or R-complex. The reptilian brain is all about physical survival—the three F's (Feed me! Fight me! Fuck me!... Didn't I already mention that somewhere?). R-complex behavior is automatic, ritualistic, and

highly resistant to change—just like the Vatican. So it would follow that people who identify too strongly with their reptilian brain functions might resonate with dinosaurs and snakes and their legacy of reptilian archetypes, which turn up so often in our creation myths and dreams.

Or maybe there's more to it than that. Maybe in some cheap-ass sci-fi version of the Many-Worlds Interpretation from quantum physics, a parallel universe was created when a meteor slammed into the Yucatán 65 million years ago and dinosaurs survived the Ice Age by going underground. And now that parallel universe is interacting with our own and the dinosaurs have evolved into big-brained, blood-swilling Tyrannohumans who want us to take out high-interest loans on our credit cards.

But I don't think so....

While it's kind of fun to imagine shape-shifting iguana-demons from just south of our Bardo feeding on the depressed feelings and bad sex of humankind, the real story is a bit more complicated.

Have you ever heard of the Anima Mundi—the Soul of the World? Just as every person has a soul—which can be further divided into a higher soul that seeks union with the divine spirit, and a lower soul that identifies with the False Self and its attachments to the material realm—the world also has a soul. Sometimes we refer to this world-soul as the collective unconscious, but there's more to it than just that. Again, like the human soul, the Anima Mundi can be divided into a higher world-soul that seeks union with the True God, and a lower world-soul that identifies with this False World created by the Demiurge.

“As Above, so Below,” as Hermes Trismegistus said. Or “As Within, so Without” as Carl Jung might have put it.

Also, just as every one of us has a personal Shadow (as in Jung's definition of the shadow archetype), the world also has its Shadow: the Dark Brotherhood. So in that sense, the Dark Brotherhood isn't really evil. It's just all the negative crap that the world is projecting. A shadow sphere controlled by shadow beings. Darkness that needs to be integrated by bringing it into the Light. Actually, in a way—since we haven't completely integrated our own shadows—it's us.

What keeps the Dark Brotherhood alive is human fear and negativity. They feed off our thoughts and deeds of murder, violence, rape, brutality, and psychopathic rage. They actively encourage and even inspire our creepy moral failings and wounded pride, our shame and grotesque self-pity, and the

assorted debaucheries that result from our addictions to pleasuring the False Self. Those desperate acts give off a corrupt spiritual essence that energizes the Dark Brotherhood. It's what makes them strong. "Food for the Moon," as Lloyd puts it. He picked up that phrase from G. I. Gurdjieff, who hinted at all of the above when he said:

"Man contains within him the possibility of evolution. But the evolution of humanity as a whole... is not necessary for the purposes of the Earth or of the planetary world in general, and it might, in fact, be injurious or fatal. There exist, therefore, special forces (of a planetary character) which oppose the evolution of large masses of humanity and keep it at the level it ought to be. For instance, the evolution of humanity beyond a certain point, or, to speak more correctly, above a certain percentage, would be fatal for the Moon. The Moon at present feeds on organic life, on humanity. Humanity is part of organic life; this means that humanity is food for the Moon. If all men were to become too intelligent they would not want to be eaten by the Moon."

Yeah, getting eaten by the Moon is a big bummer.... The whole idea kind of puts a new spin on the Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his cult of Moonies, doesn't it? What better way to stir up a shitstorm of negativity, over the long haul, than to get thousands of perfect strangers to marry each other in a mass ceremony at Madison Square Garden? (Where on May 18th, 1982, Reverend Moon married over 2,200 couples in one day alone.)

It was Gurdjieff's belief that if people refused to do the inner work that served the purposes of "Great Nature," then their excess energy would be extracted from them in the form of "useless suffering." Sometimes this extraction would proceed on a massive scale by means of wars, famines, floods, and epidemics. But Gurdjieff didn't see our situation as hopeless. He said there was a way out for individual men and women. Maybe the masses were screwed, but an individual could outwit the forces that oppose human evolution. "The liberation that comes with the growth of mental powers and faculties is liberation from the Moon."

Like resonates with like, and if you don't resonate with the Dark Brotherhood's lower astral frequency, then they won't be able to feed off you. If you don't identify too strongly with your reptilian brain functions, then you won't see shape-shifting reptilians. Of course, shit will still happen.... You're in a human body, after all—and bodies have a tendency to age, sicken, and die. But if you're sincere in your efforts not to become food for the Moon, then the Brotherhood of Light will be there to help you.

What, you didn't think you were on your own, did you?

All daimons belong to the Brotherhood of Light, of course. They're the liberators of humanity, the diametric opposite of the Archons. Sometimes it's hard to remember that, because daimons, as a rule, don't make life easy on their human charges. They toss up obstacles left and right. But learning how to overcome those obstacles is exactly how we achieve liberation and enlightenment. Consider what W.B. Yeats had to say on the subject:

"It was Heraclitus who said: the Daimon is our destiny. When I think of life as a struggle with the Daimon who would ever set us to the hardest work among those not impossible, I understand why there is a deep enmity between a man and his destiny, and why a man loves nothing but his destiny."

*In addition to daimons, the Brotherhood of Light is also comprised of guardian angels and all those people, past and present, who've made a conscious decision to align themselves with the Light of the spirit and the True God. That latter category would include historical figures like Buddha and Jesus and so on (along with less obvious names like Nikola Tesla, Edgar Cayce, Buckminster Fuller, and Wilhelm Reich), and also ordinary souls like that nice guy who gave you a job when you were down on your luck. Many of the people you meet in this lifetime from the Brotherhood of Light will be members of your *karass*—spirit friends you've met in previous lifetimes—but they'll be having worldly problems of their own and you won't always be able to count on them. For more consistent spiritual help in this world, your best bet is to get in touch with one of the transcended enlightened masters, like Buddha or Jesus—or your own daimon, if you have one.*

All daimons and transcended enlightened masters are working from the Other Side to transmit liberating ideas (or "infused knowledge") into receptive individuals in our physical realm. It happens whenever human culture seems ready for it. Shakespeare couldn't have written two plays a year for twenty years without a little help from the Brotherhood of Light, to cite just one example. Bob Dylan made the connection explicit when he said of his own songwriting: "The songs are there. They exist all by themselves just waiting for someone to write them down. I just put them down on paper. If I didn't do it, somebody else would."

Great advances in science and technology often come about in the same way. Descartes invented calculus while he was relaxing in bed one morning. Francis Crick first visualized the double-helix structure of DNA while he was tripping on LSD. Friedrich August Kekulé spent twenty years trying to

figure out the structure of the benzene ring, then one night he went to sleep and had a dream about a snake swallowing its own tail—the Uroboros—and everything clicked for him. “Visions come to prepared spirits,” he said later, sounding a little less than humble. He should have just thanked his daimon. (Then again, maybe the benzene ring was one for the Archons.)

Daimons aren’t much talked about these days, but there was a time when people were on far better terms with them. The Neoplatonists certainly didn’t have any problems with their daimons. They actually hoped and prayed for a daimonic guide to help them navigate the perils of this world. It was only after Christianity came along that daimons were demonized as (what else?) demons. Archons should be regarded as the true demons, in the Christian sense of the word; daimons shouldn’t be tarred with the same brush. But the church didn’t want anyone to know that, because it was making a big power-grab in the third- and fourth-centuries. It wanted to be the only intermediary between the realm of spirit and the realm of man—a role that properly belongs to a daimon.

So how can you tell the difference between a daimon and a demon, you might ask? It’s all in what they want you to do. For instance, if you’re asked to sacrifice your children, you can be pretty sure you’re dealing with a demon—unless, of course, your name is Abraham. No, wait... I take that back. Even Abraham should have known better. Human sacrifice is never okay—I don’t care what anyone says. When Isaac was laid out on that rock with his father’s knife poised above his chest, I’m sure he wasn’t thinking the God of Abraham was all that great.

Hermes is the quintessential daimon personified. You have to love Hermes: relaying messages from the gods, conducting souls through the underworld, assisting in the creation of poetry and literature, parceling out dreams and prophetic visions. The guy’s busier than Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. If you’re looking for a more recent example, Napoleon had a daimon (or demon) to guide him during the French Revolution. Sometimes it showed up as a shining sphere, which he called his star. At other times it popped in to warn him as a dwarf dressed up like Little Red Riding Hood.

Napoleon managed to knock the Catholic Church down a few well-deserved notches. He wiped out a lot of the monasteries that had participated in the Inquisition and he turned St. Bernard’s Clairvaux abbey into a prison. Then he forced Pope Pius XII to watch helplessly as he crowned himself Emperor in the cathedral of Notre-Dame.

Daimon or demon? You be the judge.

See, it's not such a black-and-white world.... If you think an all-powerful Church that tortures and burns anyone who doesn't share its beliefs is an okay thing, then there's no reason to change. The modern nation state that Napoleon ushered in seemed like a big improvement, but it's had its own share of problems, like bigger and more destructive wars, gulags, corporate malfeasance, and the ever-increasing concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, to the detriment of everyone else.

It's like Yeats said in 1896 after seeing the premiere of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi: "What more is possible? After us the Savage God."

Actually, the Savage God has been here all along. The Archons never left us.

The latest incarnation of the Dark Brotherhood seems to have us heading toward a microchip-controlled, totalitarian New World Order with plans to reduce the bulk of humanity to the level of wage slavery and herd-like intellectual conformity. If that's the case, then maybe the Apocalypse isn't such a bad thing—provided no one gets hurt.

I'm sorry all this sounds so fucking bleak, but as our moon-mad pal Gurdjieff was so fond of saying: If a man in prison has any chance of escaping, the first thing he has to do is realize he's in prison. So long as he thinks he's free, he's screwed. And the Dark Brotherhood is really, really good at turning people into slaves while at the same time making them think that they're in control of their own destinies.

Think about how advertising works. All those shiny new cars and nubile young women, the expensive Swiss watches and sparkling diamonds, the cigarettes and bottles of liquor that promise to make you look cool. They're all glamour traps. They're selling you an impossible dream of luxury and fame and hassle-free sex—a James Bond sort of lifestyle that no one can really live up to, except maybe Hugh Hefner. Mal bought into that dream and it kept him emotionally stunted and dissatisfied throughout his entire life, in a permanent state of pissed-off longing. It also made him work harder to buy things that he really didn't need. A new Corvette or a liquor store extracts a price in physical, mental, and emotional toil—all of which goes to feed the Dark Brotherhood.

(Women are just as susceptible—just ask any Architectural Digest-reading mom who's blown half her kid's college fund on a new bathroom with English tub fixtures and handcrafted Italian tiles. Or talk to the housewife with ten different kinds of mascara and a closet full of Harlequin romance

novels who's given up on making love to her husband because he doesn't live up to her fantasies—nevermind that with her stretchmarks and stomach flab, she's nobody's ideal fantasy material, either.)

Movies and television are the same as advertising, only worse. Your brain shuts down after watching about half-an-hour of a movie or television show; it goes into a hypnoidal twilight state and stops distinguishing between Self and Other. You start to live what's on the screen—which puts you in the ideal state to feed the Dark Brotherhood.

Think about all the emotional turmoil you put yourself through while watching a movie: You're at once the cop and the serial killer, the doctor with three wives and the chipper farm girl with leukemia. You gladly participate in car crashes, cocaine binges, machine gun shoot-outs, battlefield skirmishes, doomed love affairs, skyscraper fires, oceanliner disasters, contagion by monkey virus, race riots, blood feuds, witch trials, voodoo rites, emasculation by Egyptian scarabs, and bloody, gushing stomach eruptions triggered by fanged, penis-shaped little space-aliens. You think you're having a great time as all that emotional crap boils through you. But now imagine a giant astral vacuum-funnel above every movie theater sucking up all that negativity, making the Dark Brotherhood grow stronger. They've got you resonating on the lower levels of the Bardo—just where they want you—and you've paid the price of a movie ticket to do it.

You've colluded in your own doom, as Philip K. Dick would have put it. How fucked up is that?

I'm not saying you should stop going to movies, or stop watching television. You should just try to be more aware of the effects that entertainment has on you. If a movie is making you feel anxious or depressed, don't buy into it. Remember that it's only a movie. Later on you can graduate to saying, "It's only life..." when something in life is making you feel intense negative emotions—because really, each lifetime is like a movie when viewed from the perspective of your immortal spirit.

Heraclitus summed it up with another saying that was one of Yeats' favorites: "Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals, the one living the other's death and dying the other's life."

Gordon is about to find out exactly how that works.

HIPGNOSIS

Ever since his inebriated interlude with Jimmy's Uncle Lloyd on Halloween, Gordon has had a nagging sense that he's forgetting something—*something important*. He'd expected the feeling to go away eventually, but it continues to gnaw at him.

Hints and suggestions of that forgotten knowledge seem to pop up at Gordon everywhere: in the books he reads, in articles from magazines, flipping through channels on TV. It's there as a hidden subtext in Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian* and in a *Newsweek* story about AIDS. It lurks behind the eyes of Andy Kaufman, the Son of Sam, and Saddam Hussein. It's in the low white noise of greed and treachery running just under the ego-stoked chatter on *The 700 Club* and on time-wasting game shows like *Let's Make A Deal!* and *Wheel of Fortune* (but whenever he sees that slender blonde who turns the letters on *Wheel of Fortune's* game board, Gordon thinks, *I don't care if Vanna White is an agent of the Illuminati—she's still one hot babe...*). Somehow, all those things and more are tied together, like some Grand Unified Theory of how the world operates—a sinister secret history. Gordon's gut tells him it's something the adults are willfully concealing from him. Information the hypocrites-in-charge don't want him to know.

On the other hand, he could just be having a bout of teenage paranoia.

Gordon is sixteen, after all. Everything seems like a conspiracy at that age—even the food they serve in the high school cafeteria. (*Especially* the food in the cafeteria. That tuna casserole they serve on Fridays smells so foul that it could make a dog vomit.)

Although he might be having a hard time believing the adults are just as clueless as he is about almost everything, Gordon is observant

enough to realize that for the majority of people, maturity brings on a dulling of the senses and an incurious, cow-like acceptance of the world's ways. Deep down, everyone must intuitively understand that they're not being given the whole story about the things that matter most to them—but they've either grown past caring, or they're so scared of what the truth might reveal that they don't want to know anymore.

Admittedly, the search for truth usually just leads to more trouble. Gordon knows what Ecclesiastes has to say on the subject: "He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow..." and so forth. Despite that, Gordon still wants answers. And his questions keep expanding in an ever-widening gyre, like the spiral that Alfred Jarry drew on Ubu's belly in his illustrations for *Ubu Roi*:

When did my mother start hating me?... Who levitated and killed the Doberman in the Smiley's backyard and why?... How come Doctor Smiley's medical treatments always make me feel sicker?... Why did my dad have to die?... What's up with the nudist business and my mom playing hide-the-salami (and maybe the lumberyard's assets) with Uncle Gerald?... What was the rationale behind Bank of America picking Fresno County as the first place to try out credit cards, and why does it now have the highest rates per capita in the state for violent crime?... And why does California, in general, attract so many murderous weirdoes, like the Zodiac Killer, the SLA, and the Manson Family?

That whole Zodiac Killer thing especially gets to him. Gordon remembers taking the bus to Washington Elementary in the first grade and hearing about the Zodiac Killer's threats to blow up a big yellow school bus full of California children. All of Gordon's little friends talked about it on the playground like a ghost tale around the campfire come to life. And even though the Zodiac Killer murdered at least eight people and left behind a litter of clues, he was never caught.

Why not?

If there *is* a God, why does he allow evil shit to happen? Or, as David Hume unpacked that question: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

If everything on Earth happens for a reason, then is all this nasty crap part of the Divine Plan?

The more Gordon finds out about the world, the more difficult it is for him to see the world as having any sort of a Divine Plan whatsoever. It's too cold, too complicated, too cruel out there. The overwhelming sense of nihilism, narcissism, and depravity can seem suffocating at times. Maybe that's why he's latched onto Gnosticism. It makes him feel like his life matters, at least a little. It gives him a shot at figuring things out. If the Archons are in charge of this world, why wouldn't Charles Manson and the Zodiac Killer have the run of it? Maybe the Gnostic perspective isn't particularly cheery—nobody's sliding down rainbows and shitting out gumdrops, after all—but ever since he started evolving into that spiritually-daring Gnostic Boy, Gordon has felt like his life has meaning again.

But maybe that's what paranoia is: the search for meaning run amok. Is it a sign of mental illness to look for meaning where—on the surface, at least—there is none? Or is it a sign of superior mental health? Wasn't it the *New York Times* book critic, Anatole Broyard, who said, "Paranoids are the only ones who notice anything anymore..." or was that Thomas Pynchon? Surely the slop being spoon-fed to us on the six-o'clock news isn't keeping us well informed. Could paranoia be the psychological equivalent of physical pain, a kind of early warning signal from the collective unconscious telling us that something's wrong? Maybe that's why Gordon keeps tugging at the sticky threads of a bizarre web of interrelationships that runs deep below the surface of the world's most insane and shadowy events.

Take Charles Manson, for example, who was quoted in *Rolling Stone* as saying, "Total paranoia is total awareness." Whether that statement is true or not, Gordon isn't sure. But what he finds interesting is that around that same time, Manson also wrote an article about "getting the fear" for a magazine put out by the Process Church of the Final Judgement. According to a book written by Ed Sanders called *The Family*, the Process Church was a splinter group that had sprung from the Church of Scientology. Manson, too, was allegedly involved in Scientology—even before he started his Family, he went around saying he'd done 150 hours of Scientology "auditing" while he was in prison and had thus become an Operating Thetan. And as Gordon knows now, thanks to Lloyd's insider info, Scientology was an outgrowth of L. Ron Hubbard's association with Jack Parsons and the

Ordo Templi Orientis. In fact, as Lloyd explained it to Jimmy, most of Scientology's philosophy and techniques had been cribbed from OTO sourcebooks and rituals—which connects Manson to the Great Beast himself, Aleister Crowley. And through Crowley, it goes back even further, to the Ancient Mystery Cults of Egypt and Babylon.

Black Magick. Terrible Presences. Archons. A Dark Brotherhood.... The more Gordon thinks about it, the more sense it makes. There's a hidden, malevolent force at work in the universe, something insidious and evil that wants to fuck us up.

Or do I just think that because my mom hates my guts?

Maybe Lloyd could help Gordon figure out the Incredibly Big Gnostic Picture while providing him with answers to some of his more pressing, personal concerns as well (*"What's the Ordo Templi Orientis take on ass-kicking Easter Bunnies, O Great and Flabby Wise One?"*). But whenever Gordon thinks about Lloyd, he gets a queasy-sick sense of his own social inferiority and, below that, a panicky, almost atavistic feeling of revulsion and dread. It's like being locked in the same room with an over-muscled, well-spoken, and extremely hungry hyena. Gordon doesn't understand *why* he feels that way, exactly—but he hasn't run into Lloyd since Halloween, and he's in no great hurry to set up another meeting, even though Jimmy has said that Lloyd wants to see him again.

Gordon chooses, instead, to lock himself away in his room, where he hunkers down in a black vinyl beanbag chair with his Koss headphones, his portable stereo, a yellow legal pad, and a big stack of library books. He's checked out George Johnson's *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics*, John D. Marks' *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate: The CIA and Mind Control*, Donald Bain's *The Control of Candy Jones*, and quantum physicist David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, among other books.

As a visual treat for his overworked eyes, Gordon pauses now and then to thumb through *The Work of Hipgnosis: Walk Away Rene*, a collection of album cover art created by the graphic design firm, Hipgnosis, for bands like Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Genesis, Yes, and Black Sabbath. Staring at that famous shot of the two men in suits shaking hands while one of them is in flames—from the cover of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*—it occurs to Gordon that creating

surrealistic images for album covers and books might be a fun way to make a living. Maybe he'll study photography and graphic design in college. In the meantime, there's Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* to get through.

After a few weeks of such activity, Gordon decides to channel his increasingly paranoid worldview into an essay for his high school civics class. The class is taught by Professor Hironada, a tendentious and smug little Japanese man who patterns himself after the semanticist-turned-senator, S.I. Hayakawa. (He even, annoyingly, goes around wearing the same Scottish tam-o'-shanter that Hayakawa wears as a sort of trademark. He's also rumored to give pretty girls higher grades in exchange for lap dances—and he got his steely Nipponese wiener sucked by the until-then-flunking captain of the J.V. football team, if gossip from the stoner crowd can be believed.) The essay is supposed to be at least five pages on the separation between church and state. Gordon uses that rather loose criterion as an excuse to write a thirty-three-page history titled:

OCCULT POLITICS:

The Dark Influence of Secret Societies and Corporate Cabals On U.S. Government Policy

He starts off with the Freemasons, of course.... Gordon cites claims by Masonic historians that the Boston Tea Party was carried out exclusively by Masons meeting in secret at the Green Dragon Tavern, that Paul Revere was a Mason, and that of the 56 signatories of the Declaration of Independence, only a few of them weren't Masons as well. He shows evidence that the Grand Master of the Philadelphia Lodge, Benjamin Franklin, used his Masonic connections in France to help secure financing for the American Revolution. He points to the fact that the designer of the Great Seal of the United States, Charles Thomson, incorporated Masonic and Illuminati symbols into the Great Seal's design, as can be seen on the back of any U.S. dollar bill. Gordon also quotes from a letter sent in 1782 by a Master Mason whose likeness is on the front of those same dollar bills. George Washington wrote:

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"It was not my intention to doubt that the doctrines of the Illuminati, and the principles of Jacobinism, had not spread in the United States. On the contrary, no one is more fully satisfied of this fact than I am."

That quotation leads Gordon into a discussion of how secret societies throughout American history have involved the nation in wars and revolutions by inciting violence and civic unrest on both sides of political conflicts. The Masonic slogan, as he points out, is *Ordo ab Chao*—Order out of Chaos—which could be interpreted as a directive to sow crisis and turmoil with the intent to steer public demand for social change. In other words, create chaos in secret, then openly propose a solution that advances the agenda of the New World Order (or *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, as it says on the Great Seal, which officially translates as "New Order of the Ages"). Gordon provides examples of how that might have worked:

— The War Between the States was fomented by European bankers (specifically, the Rothschilds) who feared that the U.S. would soon become such a powerful economic force that it would threaten their dominant role in global finance. Pitting the American North against the South would create massive war debts, crippling the U.S. economy, while providing the bankers with huge profits on the loans made to both sides. In 1854, conveniently for the bankers, a secret society called the Knights of the Golden Circle was founded by Doctor George W.L. Bickley—an author, surgeon, and University of London graduate with suspected ties to the Illuminati. The KGC had a grandiose plan to create a secessionist slaveholding Southern nation some 2,400 miles in circumference, which, in turn, stirred up much of the fear and resolve necessary to get the war rolling. Later, when things weren't going so well for the KGC (they would go underground after the war, only to reemerge in the future as the Ku Klux Klan), one of its members, John Wilkes Booth, conspired to assassinate President Lincoln.

— The Serbian secret society known as the Black Hand, led by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, was responsible for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which triggered a complex web of international alliances that precipitated World War I. On August 4th, 1914, the United Kingdom declared war on Germany while the United States proclaimed neutrality. That neutrality lasted until April 6th, 1917,

when America was goaded into the war by the convergence of two suspiciously contrived events: the sinking of the *Lusitania* and public furor drummed up over the Zimmermann telegram—the latter a message intercepted by British intelligence from the Foreign Secretary of the German Empire, Arthur Zimmermann, proposing to form an alliance with the Mexican government to take back Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico from the U.S. (*Fat chance...*). But the true, hidden reason for America's involvement was, again, banking profits and war profiteering. According to the 1936 findings of the U.S. Congress-sponsored Nye Committee, between 1915 and April 1917, the U.S. loaned Germany about 27 million dollars, while during that same period, U.S. loans to the United Kingdom and its allies amounted to 2.3 *billion* dollars, or about 85 times as much. The committee concluded that the U.S. entered the war not because of some ridiculous threat to Texas, but because it was in its commercial best interests for the United Kingdom's side not to lose. And who was making those loans? Probably the same corporate entities named in Marine Major General Smedley D. Butler's 1935 book, *War is a Racket*, which described the military-industrial complex long before Eisenhower got around to pointing a finger at it. Butler was the most decorated Marine in U.S. history when he wrote:

"I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico, and especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half-a-dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902–1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China, in 1927, I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested."

— In 1933, that same Marine Major General Smedley D. Butler appeared before the U.S. Congress to reveal a secretive Business Plot to overthrow the government of President Franklin D. Roosevelt with a military coup and install a corporate police state. The men behind the Business Plot were rich industrialists—led by the DuPont and J.P.

Morgan empires—who were alarmed by Roosevelt’s New Deal program to redistribute wealth to the poor and needy during the Great Depression via a hike in the top tax rate from 25% to 63%. The conspirators wanted Butler to lead this fascist coup, promising him an army of 500,000 men, unlimited financial backing, and positive coverage from their corporate-controlled media outlets. They were convinced that only Butler’s singular popularity and reputation for integrity could make the troops feel confident they were doing the right thing by overthrowing a democratically elected President. But Butler’s integrity wasn’t up for sale, and he subverted the Business Plot by going public with it. Congress failed to do much about his testimony, but at least FDR stayed in office long enough to get the U.S. involved in World War II.

— German resentment over the Draconian terms of the Treaty of Versailles paved the way for Hitler and the start of the Second World War. Paul Warburg—chairman of the newly created U.S. Federal Reserve System—and his brother, Max Warburg—chief of the M.M. Warburg Company, the central bank of Germany—had both attended the treaty signing to represent their respective banking interests. When Hitler began the rearmament of Germany in violation of the Versailles Treaty, the Warburgs and many other European banking families were there for him, lending financial support. (The Warburg brothers were also directors of the giant German chemical firm, I.G. Farben—proud makers of Zyklon B, the Official Gas of the Nazi Extermination Camps.) Other contributors to the Nazi cause, through their corporate connections and secret society dealings, included Henry Ford, Joseph Kennedy, and Prescott Bush; the Rockefellers, Harrimans, Morgans, and the Dulles brothers (Allen and John—later to become Director of Central Intelligence and Secretary of State, respectively, during the Eisenhower administration). Showing no allegiance to the countries in which they prospered, these elitists propagated and financed the war and profited from it throughout the hostilities. The majority of U.S. citizens, again, wanted no part in the war until they were goaded into it by another suspiciously contrived event: this time, the supposedly unforeseen Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

— Hitler was initiated by Dietrich Eckart into the Secret Doctrine of the mystic Thule Society and the Nazi Party itself was closer to a

cult than a political movement, embracing the black arts with their Sig Runes, swastikas, blood oaths, and rituals. At the end of World War II, Allen Dulles made a deal with Nazi Intelligence leader Reinhard Gehlen to smuggle thousands of Nazi scientists and war criminals into the United States under Operation PAPERCLIP, a covert program run by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), forerunners of the CIA. The ostensible purpose of Operation PAPERCLIP was to use crafty German brainpower to shore up the U.S. defense program and build rockets that could fly men to the Moon. Wernher von Braun certainly helped out there, goosing the development of intercontinental ballistic weapons in addition to his more fawned-upon work at NASA. But evidence suggests that Nazi doctors with an interest in trauma-based mind control were also being imported. CIA mind control programs BLUEBIRD, ARTICHOKE, MKULTRA and MKSEARCH would follow. (And isn't it odd that the author J.D. Salinger had been involved in Operation PAPERCLIP during his enlistment in the CIC and his book, *The Catcher in the Rye*, played a key role in at least two possibly mind-controlled assassination attempts—by Mark David Chapman and John Hinckley Junior?)

— Then there's the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the war in Vietnam, and John F. Kennedy's personal war with the Mafia, the Federal Reserve, and the Council on Foreign Relations. Kennedy was willing to take on anybody—and he paid the price accordingly. Who killed him? Certainly not Oswald, acting alone. The findings of the Warren Commission Report are doubted by just about everyone who takes the time to consider the details seriously. The tangled web of a conspiracy is so thick around JFK's death that all of its individual threads may never be unraveled.

Which leads Gordon into a disquisition on conspiracy theories, in general. The label "conspiracy theorist," he contends, has been widely used to dismiss people who question the official media- and government-approved version of events like the JFK assassination. The term is used as a pejorative, implying that a person who questions the government or the evening news must be suffering from paranoia or some other form of mental lunacy. So now it's easy—almost a reflex—to dismiss anything a "conspiracy theorist" says without even

listening. How convenient that must be for a National Security State that routinely lies, commits crimes, intimidates and murders witnesses—and then tries to hide, falsify, or destroy the evidence.

Conspiracy theories crop up whenever the evidence doesn't fit the story being told, Gordon asserts. It's that simple. When there's no evidence to indicate a conspiracy, conspiracy theories are scarce. But when the government or the corporate-controlled news outlets are obviously lying or suppressing the truth—that's when the conspiracy theorists dive in. Rather than being indicative of a psychological malady, that willingness to question the powers-that-be is more like a patriotic duty. "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom," as Thomas Jefferson said. Untold millions have died for the profit of a few—and it shouldn't have to be that way.

Gordon's essay goes on in that vein for a few more paragraphs; then, winding down, he segues into Joseph Campbell's theories on the origin of secret societies. They were a vengeful male response to primitive matriarchal societies, Campbell suggests in *The Masks of God*. Men in such societies led easy lives, but they were prone to crushing feelings of inferiority brought on by living among women who "were not only the bearers of children, but also the chief producers of food." For the purposes of ego-preservation, these men "developed secret lodges and societies, the mysteries and terrors of which were primarily against women." Campbell describes how those societies worked:

"Admission to them is through election and is generally limited: they are not for all. Moreover, they tend to be propagandistic, reaching beyond the local tribe, seeking friends and members among alien peoples.... A particular stress is given in these secret men's societies to a skull cult that is often associated with the headhunt. Ritual cannibalism and pederasty are commonly practiced.... Ironically (and yet by no means illogically), the most prominent divinities of these lodges are frequently female, even the Supreme Being itself being imagined as a Great Mother; and in the mythology and ritual lore of this goddess a lunar imagery is developed."

Things may not be all that different today, Gordon suggests. Cannibalism and pederasty—it's every secret society man's occult patriotic duty. (*Food for the Moon*, Gordon thinks, but he doesn't include that phrase in his essay.)

In his final summing up, Gordon touches upon the Bilderbergers, the National Security Council, the Trilateral Commission, the Skull and

Bones society, CIA drug-running and money-laundering, and Richard Nixon preening in a pretty dress in front of the great stone owl at Bohemian Grove (in Nixon's own words: "The most faggy goddamned thing you could ever imagine..."). There's one man at the center of all this secret society activity, where black magic, military intelligence, and mind control seem to strangely converge. His name is George H.W. Bush. America's Vice President is the reigning High Priest of Occult Politics, at least so far as Gordon can tell.

As for the separation between church and state—considering that almost all secret societies practice occult rituals derived from the Ancient Mystery Cults, and nearly all top-level politicians belong to at least a few secret societies that covertly steer their policies—there's really no separation between church and state whatsoever....

"Politics," as Bob Dylan so aptly put it, "is the work of the devil."



Professor Hironada hands Gordon's essay back to him at the end of May. While sitting at his desk, Gordon quickly scans through all thirty-three pages. He doesn't find any red-penciled spelling corrections, or any notes in the margins about grammar or confused rhetoric. There's only this at the bottom of the very last page:

"While your marshalling of so many diverse (if often dubious) facts is impressive, your insinuation that our current Vice President is a blood-swilling child molester is too fantastical and scabrous to be believed. **B+**."

Humph.... Gordon, of course, would have liked an **A**, but he's not about to go crawling up to that smug semanticist-turned-senator manqué to offer him a blowjob.



Later that same day, Mr. Witzkowski announces over the P.A. system that a special assembly will be held in the high school's Lincoln Theatre in lieu of the last two class periods. No one seems to know what the assembly is about as they settle into the theatre's cushy beige

fold-down seats. Gordon, Jimmy, Hideous, and D.H. take over a line of seats to the right of the aisle, two rows from the front, while Skip and Twinker sit down just behind them. "I wonder what Witz has got up his sleeve..." says D.H., who seems just as suspicious about everything as Gordon does these days.

"Maybe he'll be giving us a demonstration on the manly art of self-love while he gnaws on the warm innards of a Cub Scout," says Gordon, unable to shake the pederast-cannibal theme.

"*Sick!*" says Jimmy approvingly.

"Okay, let's all quiet down!" Mr. Witzkowski says from up on the stage. A single spotlight dazzlingly reflects off his oily white forehead as the rest of the theater descends into darkness. Mr. Witzkowski is holding a microphone, as usual. When he rubs it against the leg of his polyester slacks, a loud burst of static serves to focus everyone's attention. "That's better..." he says. "Good. Now, today we have a real treat in store for you boys and girls. We have a special surprise guest, flown all the way in from Reno, Nevada. And I know you're gonna love him. So everyone, let's give a big Viking round of applause to Doctor William Bryan Lemingeller, Master Hypnotist!"

A squat, bald-headed man wearing a charcoal grey suit and tie jogs onto the stage and takes the microphone from Mr. Witzkowski amid rapid-fire bursts of blue-and-white strobe lights. The theater's loudspeakers thunder with the bombastic guitar riff from Boston's "More Than a Feeling". Doctor Lemingeller swings his doughy fists in the air like a prizefighter warming up and shouts: "Are we gonna have some fun or what?"

"*Yeah!*" the younger members of the audience shout back at him. Twinker can be heard just under their roar, commenting, "Master *Bator* is more like it. That guy looks like a penis in a suit."

In Gordon's eyes, he seems closer to a middle-aged Aleister Crowley during his head-shaving phase.

"Hey, thanks.... Thanks a lot," Doctor Lemingeller says as the roar of approval dies down. He's already wiping shiny drops of sweat from his brow. "Before I begin, I'd like to thank the Road Safety Program for bringing me to this great little town of yours, along with my local sponsor, Lloyd Marrsden, in partnership with Independent Insurers."

HIPGNOSIS

“Your Uncle Lloyd paid for this?” Gordon hisses at Jimmy.

“Hey, it’s better than going to class, isn’t it?”

“Something’s screwed up here....”

“You *always* say that,” Jimmy hisses back. “*Relax.*”

“Today I’m going to be taking you on an incredible journey into the unconscious power of your own minds,” Doctor Lemingeller intones with hammy drama. It sounds like the microphone is stuck halfway inside the cavern of his big, toothy mouth. “You’ll be amazed and astounded—I *guarantee it*. The power of the mind is a truly wondrous thing to behold, but most of us aren’t even close to tapping its full potential. Today I’m going to show you how to get a little closer. So now—if you don’t mind—I’m going to put this entire audience into a light hypnotic trance. Don’t worry. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Just close your eyes and let your whole body relax while I count backwards from ten. *Ten....* Everybody relaxed? Eyes closed? Good. *Nine....*”

The strobe lights pulse slowly, monotonously. “Feel your eyelids getting heavier. You’re going deeper... deeper now to a place of total relaxation. Yes, that’s it...” Doctor Lemingeller sighs as if he’s just had a hit of morphine. “*Eight....* Going even deeper. Feels good, doesn’t it? There’s a pleasant feeling of warmth and heaviness in your limbs and your mind is relaxed and alert. You’re going deep to a place of perfect contentment. You might see yourself walking down stairs. Relax and breathe deeply. Let your mind drift. Just listen to my voice as I say... *Seven....*” Whatever Doctor Lemingeller is doing, by the count of five, it seems to be working. Gordon finds himself feeling pleasantly stoned, high on his own brain chemistry—or *whatever*.

“I have to go pee...” D.H. whispers in a tiny Gumby doll voice. Skip laughs through his nostrils. Gordon feels himself rising toward normal consciousness, but then he hears Doctor Lemingeller’s soothing words: “*Four....* Pay no attention to any voice but my own. You’re still going deeper... deeper... deeper into a trance. Very relaxed now, perhaps more relaxed than you’ve ever been in your entire life. Nothing can disturb your deep sense of peace and contentment. And you’re still... going... *deeper.*”

Gordon disappears right back down the rabbit hole of his own mind.

“*Three....* As you travel deeper into a state of perfect relaxation, you’ll begin to feel your left arm going pleasantly numb. Feel the tingle? That numbness will go away whenever you want it to, but for now just relax and enjoy the sensation of your arm getting lighter... and *lighter.... Two....* You’re still perfectly relaxed, but your left arm feels like a balloon filled with helium. It’s so light now that it might even be rising into the air. Don’t try to stop it. Let your arm do whatever it wants to do while the rest of your body stays in a deep, peaceful state of relaxation. You’re in a very deep trance now.... *One....* In a few moments, you’ll open your eyes at my command and take a look around. Your mind will be alert and at ease. You’ll be able to see, hear, and remember everything that happens to you. Feel free to talk. But you’ll still be in a trance, under the power of my suggestion. Are you ready? Okay then, on the count of three: *one, two, three....* Open your eyes.”

Gasps of amazement and uneasy laughter. About twenty percent of the students in the audience have their left arms drifting in the air above their heads. Some are able to put their arms down, but others can’t—in fact, when they push down on their raised arms, the arms shoot right back up as soon as they let go. Doctor Lemingeller allows everyone to talk for a while, then he shouts above the babble: “I’d like some volunteers to come up on the stage with me for the rest of the show. I’ll take all those in the audience who are already raising their left hands.”

Gordon, Jimmy, and Twinker all have their left arms raised high, so up on the stage they go. Hideous wishes them well. “Have gud time. Maybe next time someone not make pee-pee joke and I go, too.” Hideous glances at D.H. and arranges his pierced features into a scowl.

“They’ll be up there quacking like goddam ducks, Hideous...” D.H. tells him. “You’re not missing much.”

“Put your arms down, you fuckin’ freaks,” Skip says, leaning back in his seat with a grin.

Once everyone is up onstage, Doctor Lemingeller introduces his lovely assistant, Vonda—who could be Vanna White’s slutty, bar-hopping older sister. She’s wearing a low-cut blue spangled dress and fishnet stockings. Her boobs are enormous and as round as fishbowls—obviously artificial. Meanwhile, in the background,

stagehands bring out folding chairs for the volunteers—about twenty or thirty, in all. After everyone has taken a seat, Doctor Lemingeller suggests to the volunteers that they're all in an orchestra. He goes down the line, telling each of them what instrument they'll be playing. Jimmy gets a cello, Twinker, a violin. Gordon, to his disappointment, has to play an oboe.

Gordon isn't even sure he knows what an oboe looks like, precisely. He imagines something like a clarinet, only longer—about the length of an ostrich's neck. That'll have to do. Some fancy orchestral music starts playing over the loudspeakers. Gordon puckers up his lips and blows. He knows he's just pretending to play an oboe, but he feels weirdly compelled to do it. The audience is already laughing, but he truly doesn't care.

The music suddenly segues to Black Sabbath's "Paranoid." Doctor Lemingeller tells the volunteers that they all now have guitars and drums. Heavy metal mayhem takes over. Jimmy gets to his feet and starts imitating Ozzy Osborne. He's good at it. If a live bat were to suddenly fly onstage at that moment, Jimmy would no doubt bite its head off. Noticing Twinker already playing drums like a madwoman, Gordon imagines an electric guitar in his hands. He stands up and starts channeling Ozzy's former lead guitarist, Randy Rhodes, who died in a plane crash just over a year ago. Maybe that's in bad taste (for multiple reasons...), but again, he doesn't care.

The disembodied astral presence of Randy Rhodes doesn't seem to mind, either. In fact, he's into it.

"Okay, that's enough!" Doctor Lemingeller shouts as the music fades away. "Wow, you guys rock!" Even hypnotized, Gordon knows Doctor Lemingeller is patronizing them. The spirit of Randy Rhodes is insulted. He bails.

"I see a few of you have come out of your trances," says Doctor Lemingeller. "Don't worry—it's nothing to be ashamed of—but at this point I'm going to ask you to leave the stage." He walks along the row of volunteers, tapping the shoulders of the ones he wants to go. When he gets to Gordon he waves a finger in front of his nose like the arm on a metronome. Gordon thinks this is his signal to leave, but then he hears Vonda's honeyed voice saying behind him, "No, you stay...." Doctor Lemingeller pinches Gordon somewhere between the back of

his neck and his shoulder blade, causing his whole body to instantly go limp. It's the most amazing sensation. Gordon slumps into Vonda's waiting arms, feeling the back of his head nestle into her unnaturally firm cleavage. She lays him out on the floor of the stage, then leans over him to sweetly whisper in his ear: "You're going deeper, hon. You're a real good subject. You musta done this sorta thing before."

Not that I can recall... thinks Gordon, *but I love you, Vonda.*

Jimmy and Twinker also get laid out on the floor in the same way, as do about ten other students. Everyone else leaves the stage. Gordon watches them go from his vantage point on the floor. He's as limp as a dishrag. He wonders if he's drooling—or shitting his pants. He has no way of telling.

Doctor Lemingeller turns to address the audience. "What you're about to see won't be funny. If any of you start feeling uncomfortable, please feel free to leave."

He divides the remaining volunteers into two groups—or actually two clumps, since they're all still sprawled out on the floor. He instructs the volunteers in the first group—Jimmy, Gordon and Twinker among them—to sit up as if they're riding in a car. "You've been boozing it up all night at a high school graduation party, and now each of you is horribly drunk. None of you should be driving."

Gordon isn't sure about anyone else, but when *he* sits up he feels drunk as hell. His gag reflex is even acting up. He might have to roll down the imaginary window and barf.

Doctor Lemingeller moves Jimmy to the front row. "You'll be the driver," he tells him, almost cheerfully. "All the panic and guilt will be on your shoulders."

"*Nice...*" says Jimmy under his breath.

Doctor Lemingeller moves over to Twinker. "You're going to smash your pretty face through the windshield. You'll need plastic surgery—"

—like Vonda! Gordon thinks.

"—but your face will never be the same. And you—" Gordon feels a tap on his shoulder—"you'll be paralyzed from the nipples on down. Your new best friend is going to be a colostomy bag. How do you like them apples?"

What about my penis! And my future life with Vonda! “Can’t you just put me in a coma?” Gordon asks meekly.

“Okay, fine.... You go into a coma and *you*—” tapping the guy next to Gordon, Daniel Fleurbundt, better known as “Fleabutt”—“you get paralyzed for life. Tough break, hombre.”

“Thanks a lot, Gordon...” Fleabutt gripes.

“Nobody’s going to feel any actual, physical pain during this process,” Doctor Lemingeller says soothingly, “but you’ll feel all the emotions that go along with whatever happens to you.”

The second group of volunteers is organized into a second car. They’re a nice suburban family driving to a wedding. The father and two of the children are about to be slaughtered.

“Dad, you won’t be moving at all, because for the purposes of this demonstration you’ll be dead. Decapitated, actually.” Doctor Lemingeller grins. “Mom, it may take you a few minutes to realize you’ve just lost a husband and your two precious baby girls.... Bride, your intestines will be spilling out of your beautiful white wedding gown. You might try pushing them back in.”

A few squeamish girls in the audience head for the exits. Then the lights dim. Four strobe lights pulse rapidly, simulating headlights. The sound of tires slinging rain on wet pavement comes up through the loudspeakers. The diesel rumble of a truck passes from left to right. Then the sound of screeching tires rips through the theater. There’s a terrible crash, painful to the ears. After that comes a moment suspended in time, marked by the tinkling of shattered glass, and then all is quiet—until the moaning begins.

“Oh man! I can’t feel my legs!” Fleabutt cries. Gordon’s glad he missed out on that action. Being in a coma is actually quite peaceful. He dissociated from his body on impact and now his soul—or astral body, or whatever—has risen up to get a 360-degree view of all the action.

The strobe lights are flashing blue, as if police cars are already on the scene. A long, anguished wail goes up from the Car Number Two. Mom—the super-tall Kimmie Swenson—is cradling two limp girls in her arms—both of them blonde cheerleaders, oddly enough (Tracy and Stacy. Gordon lusts after them, even astrally). Kimmie cries out, *“My babies! You killed my babies!”*

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

“Oh man...” moans Jimmy, “what’ve I done?” He peers over an imaginary dashboard and starts to gag.

Hey, I was just about to do that! thinks Gordon. But his stomach feels just fine, now that he’s out-of-body. The only downside is that his body won’t be able to move if Jimmy starts puking on it.

But rather than puking, Jimmy staggers to his feet and runs through the imaginary wreckage toward stage left. *That’s just like him,* thinks Gordon, *fleeing the scene of a crime.*

Twinker has her hands up to her face. She’s trying to put it back together. Gordon is reminded, sickeningly, of his father’s face as he sat strapped in the pilot’s chair after crashing his Cessna into their living room. No lower jaw. Exposed tongue drooping like a flower stamen. *His teeth in the back pocket of my jeans....* Suddenly this isn’t so much fun anymore. Gordon gets pushed or sucked right back into his body. Even though he’s supposed to be in a coma, he starts to weep.

Helpless, Gordon watches through tears as the bride tries to stuff her imaginary intestines back through the hole in her imaginary wedding gown. He flashes on Mike Shriver lying sliced open on the white silk couch, his large intestine swimming out of him like a giant worm. There was nothing imaginary about that. *That could’ve been me,* thinks Gordon. *If I hadn’t gotten into that argument with my dad that day, I might have died with him, instead of Mike.*

The human body is such a frail, easily damaged thing.... Lying there on his back, unable to move, Gordon weeps copious tears for his dear old dad—for the first time, ever. He even cries for poor, misguided Mike Shriver.

“Okay, let’s put a stop to this... I think we’ve all seen enough,” says Doctor Lemingeller as the blue strobe lights stop flashing. “It’s time for you volunteers to go back to that place of deep relaxation and contentment. This situation was just a figment of your imagination,” he says. “You’ll never experience anything like these emotions again. But you’ll be able to remember what you experienced and think about it in an objective way.”

Doctor Lemingeller turns and addresses the audience like the portentous narrator of a Government Public Service Announcement: “The kids on this stage will never drink and drive again. But for some, it’s already too late. Somebody is paralyzed.”

"I think I've got some feeling back in my toes," Fleabutt volunteers.

"Others are dead. One person ended up in a coma." Doctor Lemingeller crouches next to Gordon, who is rubbing salty tears from his eyes with a trembling fist. Doctor Lemingeller asks him: "How did it feel to be in a coma?"

"Up yours..." Gordon croaks.

Visibly taken aback by Gordon's untowardness, Doctor Lemingeller bounces up to address the audience: "I apologize for that outburst," he says. "Hypnotized subjects are usually quite polite. But I guess everyone here was pretty shaken up by what just happened. And that's the whole point. I want you to talk to about this demonstration with your friends. Laugh about it, joke about it, cry about it—even *curse* about it. But the next time you're out drinking, please think twice about getting in a car and driving. Okay? And now let's get back to the fun part of our show. Volunteers, I want each of you to pretend you're a happy little duck in a duck pond and someone is feeding you bread...."



"Anything I can get from my subjects under hypnosis, I can also get from them in a post-hypnotic suggestion..." Doctor Lemingeller is saying. Gordon finds himself sitting back in the audience again, not remembering how he got there. Jimmy sits beside him, while Twinker is still up on the stage. Doctor Lemingeller continues: "There's even speculation that self-hypnosis, initiated by TV programs or movies, can get at least *some* of the same effects." Doctor Lemingeller pauses to mop the sweat from his bald skull with a frilly black handkerchief. "What I'm saying, basically, is... those commercials for Lay's Potato Chips? They really know what they're doing. On an unconscious level, they're giving you a kind of post-hypnotic suggestion when they say, 'You can't eat just one.' It's a false belief they're implanting, but if you've been lulled into a self-hypnotized trance by watching some dumb TV show, then your unconscious mind goes right along with it. So you end up doing exactly what they tell you. No wonder we're all getting so fat, huh? Except for Vonda, of course."

The voluptuous Vonda blows Doctor Lemingeller a kiss.

Doctor Lemingeller hams it up, clamping his hands over his heart. He's as fake as Vonda's breasts. Recovering from his swoon, he says: "You guys have already seen me giving post-hypnotic suggestions to some of the volunteers now sitting in the audience. They'll be acting on those suggestions later. But to *really* give you an idea of how powerful post-hypnotic suggestions can be, I've held back Isabelle here for one final demonstration."

It's odd to hear Twinker being referred to as Isabelle, but that *is* her real name, after all. Gordon had almost forgotten.

Turning to Twinker, Doctor Lemingeller says, "Isabelle, you're still in a very deep trance, am I correct?"

"Yes," says Twinker, looking a little zombie-like.

"Now, in a few moments I'm going to wake you up by clicking my fingers, and when I do, you won't be able to see Vonda. No matter where you look, Vonda won't be there. She'll be invisible to you. *And you won't remember that I've told you this.* Now, on the count of three: *one, two, three....*" Before he clicks his fingers, Doctor Lemingeller leads Vonda over to stand right in front of Twinker, so that Twinker's eyes are level with Vonda's silicone-enhanced chest.

Click.

Doctor Lemingeller asks Twinker if she can see Vonda anywhere in the room.

"Nope," Twinker says. She's looking everywhere. She leans forward and nearly pokes her eye out on one of Vonda's erect nipples.

"You're sure you don't see Vonda?" Doctor Lemingeller asks her.

"I don't see her anywhere. Did she leave?" The audience laughs.

Doctor Lemingeller holds up three fingers behind Vonda's back, where Twinker shouldn't be able to see them. "How many fingers am I holding up?" he asks her.

"Three."

"Now how many?" Lemingeller shows all five digits.

"Five."

Weird.... The laughter dissipates.

Doctor Lemingeller calls out: "I need a volunteer from the audience. Anyone?"

HIPGNOSIS

“I’ll do it as long as you don’t make me quack like a duck,” Skip volunteers. It’s his girlfriend up there, after all.

“You won’t need to be hypnotized,” Doctor Lemingeller assures him. “What’s your name, son?”

“Skip,” says Skip, bounding up on the stage. “Okay. So what do I do?”

Doctor Lemingeller gets a plain white piece of cardboard from one of the stagehands and holds it up against Vonda’s back—again, where Twinker shouldn’t be able to see it. With a flourish, he produces a purple marker pen and says to Skip: “I want you to write a message to Isabelle on the back of this sign. It can be anything. Just don’t tell us what it is. When you’re done, turn it over so we can’t see it.”


Skip takes the pen and writes. When he’s done, he turns the sign over, holding it flat against Vonda’s back.

“Isabelle, can you read that sign?” asks Doctor Lemingeller.

Twinker nods her head with a bemused expression. “It says: ‘Blue monkeys are flying out from under Vonda’s skirt! Love, Skip’”

“Skip, did you write that?” Doctor Lemingeller asks.

Grinning, but obviously confused, Skip nods his head. He turns the sign over, so the whole audience can see:



***Blue monkeys
are flying out
from under
Vonda's skirt!
Love,
Skip***

“How’d she do that?” Skip asks Doctor Lemingeller. “What is it, like telepathy?”

“It very well *could* be telepathy...” Doctor Lemingeller says, unknotting his black silk tie. “In many documented cases, a melding of

minds has been observed to take place between hypnotists and their subjects. See, it's my belief that our minds are not just in our heads; they also extend outward from our bodies. You can imagine it as a morphic field of thought radiating all around us, wherever we go. It also transcends space and time by extending into the past, as memories, and into the future, as intentions. If I'm right, then Isabelle could have tapped into my thought-field when I saw what you were writing. We can test that hypothesis right now if you'll be so kind as to blindfold Isabelle with my necktie."

Skip obligingly wraps the grey tie around Twinker's head and props her up as Doctor Lemingeller does his neck-pinching maneuver again, sending her into a deep trance. He says, "Isabelle, you'll be able to taste whatever I taste. We're mentally connected." Then, after pausing to make sure the blindfold is secure, Doctor Lemingeller walks to the far end of the stage. Someone behind the blue velvet curtain passes him a large banana, which he promptly peels and eats with simian glee. Through a mouthful of yellow mush, he calls out:

"Isabelle! Do you taste it? What are we eating?"

"A banana!" Twinker says, clapping her hands in recognition. The audience is collectively dumbfounded.

"What now?" Doctor Lemingeller asks. The hand from behind the curtain passes him a cluster of green Thompson Seedless grapes. He pops a few of them into his mouth and chomps.

"Grapes!" says Twinker with delight, covering her lips with her fingertips.

"Okay, Isabelle, you did great!" Doctor Lemingeller says. He walks back over to her and removes the blindfold. "On the count of three, I'm going to bring you up out of your trance again—only this time you'll be able to see Vonda. Ready? *And-a-one, and-a-two-ah, and-a-three!*

At the click of Doctor Lemingeller's fingers, Twinker starts like a scared rabbit and says to Vonda: "God! Were you standing in front of me the whole time?"

"I was," says Vonda. "You just couldn't see me."

"Which brings us to our second hypothesis..." Doctor Lemingeller says. "What if Isabelle really *could* see through Vonda? What if she could read that sign right through Vonda's tits?"

"I could!" swears Twinker. "I did!"

"Did he just say 'tits'?" Skip stage-whispers.

"Did I?" asks Doctor Lemingeller. "I'm sorry... I meant to say 'chest.' *Whoops!* I guess I'm used to the older crowds in Reno and Vegas." The audience is laughing again. Vonda wags a finger at her boss, as if to say, *You naughty Master Hypnotist...*

"Okay, so anyway... if Isabelle could see through Vonda well enough to read a sign held against her back, what does that mean?" Doctor Lemingeller asks the audience. "Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think it means we create our own reality through our programmed unconscious beliefs. And I'm talking about the deep unconscious here, as deep as the processes that control our breathing and digestion. But that deep unconscious level can be reached, through hypnosis, and its beliefs can be changed."

As he quickly—almost magically—reknits his necktie, Doctor Lemingeller says, "When I made Isabelle here believe that Vonda was invisible, Vonda was edited out of the reality that Isabelle's mind constructs. And when Vonda was removed from Isabelle's personal reality construct, then there was nothing to stop Isabelle from seeing straight through to what was behind Vonda's back."

"Tippy..." says Skip. The audience seems to agree.

"At the deepest level, everything is infinitely interconnected—all matter and all consciousness," Doctor Lemingeller says, summing up. "Most of our troubles stem from the core belief that we live in the world, when really, the world lives inside us. Reality at large is a *frequency* domain. Our minds function like billions of supercomputers working in tandem to covert those frequencies into a holographic projection of the world we think we know from our five senses. Sticks and stones and broken bones—this whole flesh circus with all its props—it's all just a *holomovement*, a four-dimensional interactive movie we can smell and taste and touch. It's created from the vast storehouse of frequency-memories in the collective unconscious—which, in turn, is constantly being updated by our individual thoughts."

Doctor Lemingeller pauses, then lets out a short bark of a laugh. "*When!* I can see *that* little speech just flew right over most of your heads. Well, if you want to learn more, you should study the work of Karl Pribram and David Bohm—a neurophysiologist and a physicist,

both leaders in their fields, who independently came up with a theory called the Holographic Model of the Universe. I don't know about you guys, but as a hypnotist who's seen a lot of very strange things, it works for me."

Hey, I was just reading David Bohm! Gordon thinks. *Mere coincidence... or are Lloyd, Doctor Lemingeller, and the town librarian involved in some sort of mind-fucking conspiracy?*

"I'm sure you're all aware of what Albert Einstein had to say on the subject," Doctor Lemingeller continues, in a somewhat snarky vein: "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit *a very persistent one*."

Suddenly, chaos erupts in the audience. Tracy and Stacy—the two blonde cheerleaders who pretended to die onstage—both stand up and yell, "Popcorn! Peanuts!" like roving snack vendors at a baseball game. Before Gordon even realizes what he's doing, he's standing, too, yelling, "Shut up!" Even more unsettling, Jimmy has leapt up to plant his two feet on the armrests of the chair he was sitting in—and he has a gun in a two-handed policeman's grip pointed at Doctor Lemingeller's chest.

"Eat lead, you cruddy hypnotist!" Jimmy shouts. Then the gun goes off. *Bam! Bam!bam!bam!bam!-bam!* He empties the barrel. Fortunately, it's only a starter's pistol, firing blanks.

"*Oh! You got me!*" Doctor Lemingeller says from up on the stage. He clutches his chest and staggers like a wounded giraffe—hamming it up again.

Jimmy, however, acts as if the bullets were real. He looks around, panicked, then goes vaulting across the backs of the theater seats in an uncanny show of agility that gets him to the fire exit in less than two seconds flat. He slams through the exit door, setting off the alarm, and then he's gone. No one in the audience has ever seen anyone move so fast.

Gordon is standing there stunned, wondering what just happened. D.H. explains to him that he'd been given a post-hypnotic suggestion to stand up and yell, "Shut up!" when he heard the triggering phrase: "...*a very persistent one*."

On the same cue, Jimmy was supposed to fire the gun at Doctor Lemingeller, but apparently he hadn't been told it was only loaded with

blanks. So now Jimmy's a mind-controlled assassin on the run—a fugitive from hypno-injustice.

Gordon says, "I guess now he knows exactly how Sirhan Sirhan must've felt."



After the fire alarm gets turned off, Doctor Lemingeller wraps up his show with a smarmy farewell and D.H., Skip, and Hideous make plans to go search for Jimmy in Hideous' truck. Gordon wants to go with them, but Doctor Lemingeller has offered to meet backstage with any of the final volunteers to give them helpful hypnotic suggestions to improve their study habits, lose weight, or quit smoking—whatever they want—and Twinker has been begging Gordon to accompany her while she asks for help in kicking her addiction to methamphetamines.

"I thought you gave up speed a long time ago..." says Gordon.

"Dude, are you fuckin' kidding me?" Skip says. "Every day, she Hoovers up enough crank to kill a goddam rhino."

"I guess I've just learned to hide it better," Twinker shrugs. "So c'mon, Gordon... *please?* Don't make me go back there all alone. That hypnotist guy creeps me out."

"Then why go back there at all?"

"I dunno... maybe because, if I don't, I'm afraid I'll end up as a totally worthless junkie whore. It's bad enough that I have scoliosis. I'd rather not spend the rest of my life turning tricks on top of that, just to feed my habit."

"Do it because I love her and I don't want to see her die," Skip says, leaning in to give Twinker a soulful kiss. As he steps away, he pats Gordon's back. "I know you'll look after her, man..." he says. "Just don't spazz out and have one of your narcoleptic fits back there. I don't like that bald-headed whack-job, either—but we've gotta go find Jimmy. He's probably all freaked out by now and we're the only people he trusts."

"Check out the crawlspace door in his bedroom downstairs," Gordon suggests to them. "Or wait—even better... check his Uncle Lloyd's place. I'll bet that's where he's hiding out."

“He’s probably already asked Lloyd to stow him away on the next Space Shuttle,” D.H. says. They head out the same exit that Jimmy had so dramatically slammed through earlier, setting off the fire alarm again.

“Thanks for doing this, Crash...” Twinker says as they head up the steps to the stage. “If I wasn’t already having sex with Skip, I probably would’ve made out with you by now, just to get you to go along with me.”

“I would’ve done it, no matter what,” says Gordon, feeling chivalrous. “I’m your friend; it’s not like you have to trade sex to get me to help you.”

“I wish everyone felt that way,” Twinker mutters.

Gordon isn’t exactly sure what Twinker means by that, but he doesn’t have much time to think about it. Doctor Lemingeller greets them backstage as they pull back the edge of the blue velvet curtain and head into the darkness:

“Isabelle! Gordon! I’m so glad you could make it,” Doctor Lemingeller says, standing in front of the zombie versions of Kimmie Swenson and Daniel Fleurbundt. “Have a seat and I’ll be right with you. We were just finishing up.”

He turns back to Kimmie and says soothingly: “Now Kimmie... you’re going to become a very great athlete. Being on the boy’s varsity basketball squad is just the beginning.... Every muscle in your body will grow stronger and have perfect cellular recall of all the right athletic moves. You’ll run faster and play harder than any of your opponents... and you’ll always win the game. Later, you’ll apply that same winning attitude toward becoming the richest woman in Fresno County. I suggest you start by investing in Microsoft stock—then real estate.”

“Wow, I didn’t even think about asking for stock tips...” whispers Twinker.

“Jimmy’s Uncle Lloyd told me the same thing...” Gordon whispers back at her, remembering. “They must be going big.”

Doctor Lemingeller shifts his attention over to Daniel: “Daniel... the nickname ‘Fleabutt’ will no longer trigger a sense of shame and inadequacy in you. The size of your rear end is perfectly normal. From

now on, whenever you hear someone call you ‘Fleabutt,’ you’ll be filled with masculine pride and a sense of worthiness. Women will lust after you and you’ll become a testosterone-charged lover, cutting an erotic swath through these little Valley towns that will take you all the way to Hollywood. You’ll become a famous actor there, adored by millions. And you’ll never have any trouble memorizing your lines or faking an accent. In fact, you’ll be so good at being fake that people will think you’re the real thing.”

Taking a few steps back, Doctor Lemingeller gazes upon his motionless subjects like Doctor Frankenstein gloating over his monster. “Now... on the count of three, I’m going to snap my fingers and bring you up out of your trance. You won’t remember my suggestions, but you’ll act upon them. Your lives will reflect the commands I’ve given you here today. *One, two, three....*”

Click.

Kimmie and Daniel twitch themselves back to reality. Doctor Lemingeller gives them some smooth patter about how their lives will be improving, and then he sends them on their way.

Watching them leave, Doctor Lemingeller shakes his head with a rueful grin and says: “I’ve never had anyone come up to me after the show and say, ‘Make me a kinder and more loving person....’ Everyone wants to be rich and famous, or they want me to undo some bad habit they’ve fallen into out of sheer laziness. It’s all about greed and lust and power-hunger—things that feed the ego—which isn’t exactly good for the soul, you know.... But I give them what they want, because it’ll make their lives more interesting. Beyond that, who cares? So you’re up next, kids. What’ll it be?”

“I want you to make me a kind and loving catalyst for world peace,” Twinker says defiantly. “But to do that, I’ll probably have to win the Miss America Contest, so first I’ll need to kick my crystal meth habit, and then I’ll have to get some enormous globules of silicone implanted in my chest.”

—like *Vonda*, Gordon thinks again, grinning. Sometimes Twinker cracks him up.

“What about you?” Doctor Lemingeller asks Gordon.

“I’m just here to watch,” Gordon says, “unless you’ve got some surefire cures for asthma and narcolepsy.”

"I might."

"Do her first and I'll think about it, okay?"

"Suit yourself.... So, Isabelle, is there some truth to what you just said? Do you really have a little drug problem?"

"Actually, I have a hideously huge, monster drug problem," Twinker says. "I have to snort a few lines every morning just to get out of bed. It's because of my back. In case you haven't noticed, it's all twisted, and I'm usually in a lot of pain."

"I think I can help out with that," Doctor Lemingeller says.

"I sure hope so," says Twinker. "Because right now, being me kind of sucks."

With the now-familiar finger wagging and pinch to the neck, Doctor Lemingeller drops Twinker into a trance. She slumps against the hypnotist and slides down his body until her cheek comes to rest near his crotch. Vonda walks over to stand next to Gordon, who can't stop himself from leaning forward in the dim light to steal another peek at her luscious fake breasts.

"You like these?" Vonda whispers, flirting with him. She tugs on the front of her spangled blue dress, revealing a lacy black push-up bra and twin crescents of blushing pink areolas. Gordon is in a trance even *before* his neck feels the talon-like clamp of Vonda's nails, plunging his face into her cleavage and its abyss.

"Isabelle... Gordon... you're both plummeting into the deepest levels of hypnotic trance you're capable of," Doctor Lemingeller says while Vonda lays Gordon out on the stage floor, crouching over him like a shimmering succubus. "And if I'm correct in my assumptions, you're both capable of going *quite* deep. I suspect you've both had repeated exposure to hypnotic mind control programming dating back to your early childhood. To test that theory, I'm going to ask you both to bring forward your core alters."

My core what? Gordon asks himself, lying utterly limp.

"Now... can either of you tell me what ALPHA is?" Doctor Lemingeller asks.

Oh, wait! I know this! "ALPHA is base level programming..." Gordon says as an alien interior voice wrestles for dominance over what he considers his normal, everyday consciousness. "Multiple

personalities, or ‘alters,’ are produced in subjects via trauma and ensuing dissociation,” the voice says. “Drugs, light and sound technologies, and NASA spinning chambers are also used to subvert normal consciousness, allowing for deeper hypnotic programming. Although often psychologically devastating, these splitting and compartmentalization techniques can result in enhanced mental functioning such as photographic memory, heightened visual acuity, and perfect auditory recall. Foreign language fluency, higher mathematics, and college-level reading skills can be achieved by age five.”

“DON’T CRY OR WE’LL SHOCK YOU!” Twinker shouts.

“Isabelle, no one here is going to shock you,” Doctor Lemingeller says, stroking the back of her head. “Please stand up. I want you to tell me what BETA is.”

“BETA is sexuality programming,” Twinker says, rising up and kicking off her white tennis shoes. The one with the eight-inch platform heel goes thudding across the floor like a tossed brick with a ransom note attached to it. Gordon watches in sheer astonishment as Twinker stretches herself like a sun-lazing cat and miraculously straightens out her spine. Her whole body suddenly assumes a sexier shape: fuller breasts, tighter abs, longer legs—even her cheekbones seem to rise. She goes from being a strange kind of beautiful to drop-dead gorgeous in less than a minute.

“I take it your BETA-programmed alter is with us now,” Doctor Lemingeller says, not quite as astonished as Gordon, but still visibly impressed. “Does she have a name?”

“Kelly,” Twinker purrs. She playfully bats at Lemingeller’s black silk tie. It’s meant to be flirtatious, but the gesture comes off as forced—a grotesque kind of acting. It’s as if she’s become the walking, talking embodiment of a sick male fantasy.

“And what are you programmed to do, Kelly?” Doctor Lemingeller asks.

“I’ve been trained in the art of sexually pleasuring older men,” she answers like a short-circuiting love doll created by the animatronics division at Disneyland. “I have no moral inhibitions whatsoever and no orifice is off-limits. I’m particularly skilled at deep throat techniques and getting my sexual partners to talk about themselves. I’ve had sex

with diplomats, high-ranking government officials, celebrities, and heads of state. Most of my sexual encounters were filmed and later used as blackmail. I've also functioned as a hypnotic courier, a drug mule, and a participant in child pornography."

"Who is your handler?" Doctor Lemingeller is going about this interview as if he's done it many times before.

"My father, Naval Lieutenant Commander Manuel A. Ramirez. He did my initial training."

There's a part of Gordon's everyday consciousness, still witnessing everything, which suddenly says, "*Holy Shit!*"

"We won't go into all the sordid details..." Doctor Lemingeller says, "but I'm guessing your father was in a compromised position with his military superiors."

"You could say that, yes," Twinker gives him a sly, fractured grin. "He raped me for the first time in a field of tall green grass when I was six. I told on him. I thought he'd get in really big trouble, but they just enrolled me in their little *pro-gram* instead. And the worst thing was... a part of me—*this* part—actually enjoyed it. I got off on it."

You probably didn't get off on it... thinks Gordon, but more likely, for their own safety, they programmed you to think that.

"The body has a terrifying logic all its own," Doctor Lemingeller says, trying to empathize with Twinker/Kelly while he uses his frilly handkerchief to mop up sweat. "Torment heightens our sensibilities. 'That which does not kill us makes us stronger,' as Nietzsche said."

"How about you, Gordon?" Vonda asks, tickling his cheek with her draped hair. "Any BETA training?"

"Does a handjob count?" It's out of his mouth before he has time to consider the impression it will make. *God!* If he wasn't so limp, he could kick himself.

"Stand up, Gordon," Doctor Lemingeller says. "I suspect your programming lies elsewhere. Do you know what DELTA is?"

Gordon shrugs. He's clueless.

"It's assassination programming," Doctor Lemingeller explains. "Trained killers, including those who perform ritual sacrifices. I'd bet good money your friend, Jimmy, is one of them. How about THETA? Ring a bell?"

HIPGNOSIS

Ob shit. “Psychic abilities...” Gordon says, the words coming unbidden. “Astral travel... remote viewing... precognition... telepathy... telekinesis... mind-sharing.”

“Yes, but aren’t you forgetting something?”

Gordon searches Doctor Lemingeller’s mind. It’s easier than flipping through TV stations with a remote. He almost instantly finds the words he should have anticipated:

“Psychic killers.”

“That’s right. You’re among the rarest of the rare—someone who can kill with just a thought. Now, there’s only one more thing,” Doctor Lemingeller says, “and I want to hear it from both of you. For today’s Double Jeopardy Jackpot... what is OMEGA?”

“Self-abuse!” Gordon answers with a surge of adrenaline.

“No! Self-destruct!” Twinker shouts, equally amped up. Her voice has become shrill and metallic. She sounds like a robot.

“Really?” says Gordon, directing a friendly squint toward Twinker. “Because I could’ve sworn it was self-abuse...”

“It’s not self-abuse,” Twinker snaps at him. “It’s self-destruct. *Self-destruct!*”

“She’s right, Gordon,” Doctor Lemingeller says. “If you start accessing memories from your training, you’re supposed to activate programming for self-destruction—not self-abuse.”

“Sheesh, no wonder I’ve been jerking off so much....”

“Who did your programming?” Doctor Lemingeller asks him. “Doctor West? Doctor Estabrooks? Certainly not Doctor Greene?”

“*Oooh!* I know Doctor Greene!” Twinker says, waving her hand. “I know him! He put an electrode in my vagina!” Obviously, one of her more obnoxious personalities has taken over. Her back has already returned to its usual, bent-out-of-whack shape.

“I’m not really sure who did my programming,” Gordon says. “I mean, I’ve been through so much...” he ad-libs. That word, OMEGA, popped him right out of his trance. He’s fully himself again.

“Just give me a name,” Doctor Lemingeller says, looking at him suspiciously. “One I haven’t already mentioned.”

Gordon takes a wild guess. “Um, Doctor Smiley?”

“Smiley!” The hypnotist’s forehead crinkles in exasperation. “*Fuck!* If Doctor Smiley didn’t have that pediatric clinic with access to all those sick kids, they would’ve strung him up by his bow tie years ago. I can’t believe they entrusted a THETA-level psychic to that asshole! You’ll need an entire course of deprogramming, right away, or who knows what’ll come crawling out of you. I’d do it myself, but I have to be on a plane back to Reno in a few hours.”

“Let me take him to see Doctor Greene!” Twinker volunteers. “I can drive a car... at high speeds into a bridge abutment! Or turn us both into a walking timebombs!”

“Isabelle, please return to your front alter position. This OMEGA personality isn’t helping....” Doctor Lemingeller breathes a heavy sigh. “Now pay attention—both of you. On the count of three, I’m going to snap my fingers and bring you both up out of your trance. You will not—let me repeat that—*will not* remember anything that we’ve talked about. Oh, and Isabelle... you’ll have to keep your degrading drug habit. They actually *want* you to have that. It induces an artificial model psychosis, which makes it easier for them to manipulate you. Now—forgetting that we ever had this conversation—on the count of three: *One, two, three....*

Whatever you say, Baldy, Gordon thinks.

Click.

He’ll be remembering everything. It’s actually making him kind of horny.



Believe it or not, Doctor Lemingeller was trying in his show-offy way to help. Not all hypnotists are bad news. The good ones know that just about everyone spends most of their time in a trance—practically all day, every day, mostly thanks to television, dull work routines, and bad habits. We willingly enter that tranquilized state of obliviousness to keep ourselves from thinking too much about all the pain and suffering in the world, including our own. We’re like the sheep in Gurdjieff’s parable about the rich and evil magician who was too stingy to put up a fence around his pasture. His sheep were always hauling their woolly asses out of there, because they knew the magician wanted to turn them into lamb chops and car seat covers. But then:

HIPGNOSIS

“At last the magician found a remedy. He hypnotized his sheep and suggested to them first of all that they were immortal and that no harm was being done to them when they were skinned, that, on the contrary, it would be very good for them and even pleasant; secondly he suggested that the magician was a good master who loved his flock so much that he was ready to do anything in the world for them; and in the third place he suggested to them that if anything at all were going to happen to them it was not going to happen just then, at any rate not that day, and therefore they had no need to think about it. Further the magician suggested to his sheep that they were not sheep at all; to some of them he suggested that they were lions, to others that they were eagles, to others that they were men, and to others that they were magicians.

“And after this all his cares and worries about the sheep came to an end. They never ran away again but quietly awaited the time when the magician would require their flesh and skins.”

Let's face the fucked up facts: a demented hypnotist-creator disguised as a caring god is in charge of this world, with a legion of dark magicians dedicated to fulfilling that unholy master's every task. I'm talking, of course, about the Demiurge and those pesky Archons again. When we learn, early in life, that this world is a deterministic prison ruled by the Dark Brotherhood, that knowledge (usually unconscious) causes us to reject cold reality and submit to the Dark Brotherhood's entrancing, mass-marketed spells instead. “You, too, can attain happiness and success and Kodak moments galore. All we require in return is....” Well, you get the picture.

Does that seem too harsh? Then consider the words of another hypnotist—one of the good ones, this time—a guy named Michael Ellner:

“Just look at us. Everything is backwards; everything is upside down. Doctors destroy health, lawyers destroy justice, universities destroy knowledge, governments destroy freedom, the major media destroy information and religions destroy spirituality.”

Why? Because big business, big government, and big religion operate outside the boundaries of conventional, little guy morality. Their true goal is not to serve the people, but to dictate to them. It's all about totalitarian control and bleeding the masses dry by any means possible—financially, emotionally, even spiritually. And so, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, you've got unrighteous doctors peddling pills that won't cure anyone's ills (but will turn huge profits for the pharmaceutical companies...). You've got unscrupulous

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

lawyers perverting the law because justice is just a game and they like seeing innocent people suffer (as long as their law firms can keep racking up those billable hours...). You've got disingenuous scholars, think tank "experts," and TV pundits planting the seeds of disinformation so others won't be able to separate the truth from their lies (because a numbed and confused electorate won't mount a serious challenge to its controllers...). And so it goes, all the way down the line.

Sure, all that stuff could be ascribed to selfish, ordinary human failings. No need to drag the Demiurge and the Dark Brotherhood into it, right? Just because the world is a little off-kilter that doesn't mean there's a bizarre supernatural conspiracy going on, overseen by evil, hyperdimensional entities using the Pentagon as their headquarters. But the more you look into these things, the more I think you'll see of what Gordon touched on in his essay about Occult Politics—an undercurrent of black magic in high places, a sinister occultism oozing around the edges of the National Security State.

Take, for instance, the U.S. importation of all those Nazi scientists, engineers, and intelligence officers under Operation PAPERCLIP. What the hell was up with that? Was the American government just picking up the fascist quest for world domination where the Third Reich had left off? The few documented facts pertaining to Nazi-influenced CIA mind control programs like MKULTRA could certainly lead a person to think that. Congress estimated in 1977 that at least 23,000 people had been experimented on, without their consent, under the auspices of MKULTRA. Lives were lost. Minds were shattered. The numbers could be much higher, but we'll never know, because in 1973 all records of the CIA's mind control activities were destroyed on the order of then Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms. MKULTRA and its successor programs went "dark" after that—becoming black box projects—but they sure as hell weren't discontinued.

In fact, Doctor Lemingeller suspects—rightly or wrongly, I can't say at this point—that Gordon, Jimmy, and Twinker practically grew up in one of those black box projects, possibly the most fiendish and ruthless one of them all:

Project MONARCH.

ANAMNESIS

Right after his encounter with Doctor Lemingeller, Gordon decides to visit his grandmother. He wants to ask her a few questions about her neighbor, Doctor Smiley. He invites Twinker to go along with him. After what they've just been through, he knows she shouldn't be left on her own.

"I should warn you, my grandma's a little flaky and out-there..." Gordon says as they're walking over from school.

"I don't care. I love being around crazy old ladies," Twinker says with a smile. She grabs Gordon's arm and does a little hop and a skip off the ground. "Man, I'm so happy right now! It's gonna be great, not being strung out anymore."

"You might feel a little crappy at first, but I know you'll pull through it. Doctor Lemingeller said you'd never have to snort crank again." Gordon figures some positive reinforcement is called for, even if it's a lie. Better that than the actual, horrific truth. Twinker doesn't seem to have any memory of her alters or mind control programming, and until Gordon can figure out how to safely deprogram her self-destructive OMEGA personality, it's probably best that her memory stays that way.

As for his own self-destruct programming (*if he was programmed at all*), he's pretty sure Doctor Smiley botched the job. There's a nasty fluttering tingle in his gut, like he's on the verge of a panic attack, and he's short of breath, which could just be asthma. But aside from those symptoms—along with an incredibly persistent hard-on—he seems to be okay. He certainly doesn't feel like killing himself. He might be persuaded to hump a vacuum cleaner, or a tub of low-cholesterol margarine... but kill himself? No.

"I don't have any time for Jehovah's Witnesses today," Helen says, greeting them at her front door.

"Grandma, it's me! Gordon!" He's been through this same routine many times before.

"If you're Mormon... well—if you ask me, Joseph Smith had far too many wives. And all those men running around in their sacred Mormon underpants? It's just silly. So count me out."

"You're right. All those Mormon guys are hopeless horndogs..." Gordon says. "Grandma, this is my friend, Twinker. Can we come inside?"

"What are you selling?" Helen asks, suspicious.

"Dog cookies!" Sometimes Gordon can't resist going tit-for-tat with her when she's veering off into the surreal.

"I don't have a dog—I *have squids!*—but you can come in, anyway. I'll make us some coffee." Helen turns and abruptly heads toward the kitchen, leaving the door wide open. "They're not *Scientology* dog cookies, are they?" she suddenly shouts from deep within the house.

"She's not having one of her better days," Gordon says to Twinker.

"I think she's nice..." Twinker whispers back. "She probably spends a lot of time petting those squids and making sure they have everything they need."

"They live in her toilet," Gordon informs her.

After they settle into the black swivel chairs around the dining room table and Helen pours the coffee, she seems to get more lucid. There's some loose talk about Lawrence Welk sniffing the damp organza panties of his floozy back-up singers, and a brief mention is made of the Reverend Jimmy Swaggart's nocturnal activities as a hard-partying iguana. But by the end of that monologue, Helen has recognized Gordon and is curious to find out if he and Twinker are dating.

"Twinker's been dating my friend, Skip," Gordon says. "We're just hanging out today because we both stayed late after a hypnotist show."

"I was always afraid to date Gordon," Twinker says, putting her hand on top of his on the table. "I thought he was too handsome and intellectual for me."

They both burst out laughing.

Helen—having a rather high opinion of her grandson—doesn't quite get the joke, but she goes ahead with the conversation, anyway. "So you saw a hypnotist! How was that?"

"Weird," says Gordon.

"Beyond weird," Twinker adds.

"Yeah. You know who he reminded me of? A lot?" Gordon is improvising to steer the conversation in the direction he wants it to go. "He reminded me of your neighbor, Doctor Smiley."

"Really? Doctor Smiley!"

"Yeah. Do you talk to him much these days?"

"Not to him, no. Sometimes I visit with his wife, Sarah. But honestly? I don't care for them much as neighbors."

"Why not?" Gordon asks.

"Oh, I don't know how to describe it, really. I guess it's because whenever I see them, they somehow bring up a deep sense of... *revulsion* in me."

"*Revulsion*. Wow! That's a pretty strong word," Twinker says.

"Well, you don't know these people, dear," Helen says, patting Twinker's hand—which is still resting in Gordon's palm. "I used to think all doctors were helpful and kind. And now, well... let's just say I know better."

"God, what'd he do?" Twinker asks.

"It's not so much what he did," Helen says, "although that's certainly bad enough. It's what he *is* that I find disturbing. He's evil."

"Evil?" Twinker almost laughs. "How can you say that?"

"I'm an old, old woman. I've earned the right to say it when I see it. This world is full of people who choose darkness over the spirit's light. The sooner you learn to recognize them, the better off you'll be."

"Well, I'm still curious about what he did," Twinker says. "I mean, it must've been pretty bad, because you don't seem all that judgmental, otherwise."

"Except for that stuff about Lawrence Welk and the organza panties..." Gordon can't help but put in. "I thought you *liked* Lawrence Welk."

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"I like his music," Helen clarifies. "And if allowing the man his panty-sniffing is the price we have to pay for his musical genius, then I say, by all means, send him mine if he wants them."

"Spoken like a true fan," Gordon says. "But about Doctor Smiley... what turned you against him? I always thought you liked him, too, for some reason."

"Do you remember that time... oh, you must've been seven or eight... when you hopped up on my fence one day and asked me if the Smiley's had a dog?"

Of course Gordon remembers. *Vividly.*

"Well, I never told you this, because I thought you were too young to know it at the time and I wanted to spare you the horror... but just that very morning I'd found a dead dog in my garbage can. And from the looks of it, it had been skinned alive."

Gordon can actually *feel* the color draining from his face.

"Now, I didn't put two and two together right away," Helen continues. "I guess I was a little dumb, or naïve, in those days. But this dog, I was sure, hadn't died of old age. All its skin had been sliced away from the neck down—even on its paws—but there wasn't any blood, anywhere."

"What kind of dog was it?" Gordon asks, as if he doesn't already know.

"Judging by its face, I'd say it was a brown Doberman pinscher."

"I saw that dog get killed in the Smiley's backyard," Gordon says. "A group of grown-ups were standing around in a circle, levitating it, and then they somehow broke its spine."

"This is the weirdest thing I've ever heard," Twinker says, squeezing Gordon's hand. "Crash, are you serious?"

"I couldn't even really believe it myself back then," Gordon says, looking at his grandmother. "But I guess it's true now, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," Helen says with a sigh. "*What a world, what a world....*"

"So Doctor Smiley is a secret dog killer," Twinker says, leaping to the obvious conclusion. "No wonder you think he's evil."

ANAMNESIS

"The worst thing is," Gordon tells Twinker, "all while I was growing up, this guy was my pediatrician. I guess he still is—only now there's no way in hell I'm ever going back to him."

"Oh, honeybug... I'm so sorry. I guess I should've told you sometime earlier. But like I said, I didn't make the connection with Doctor Smiley right away." Helen swipes at a tear as her face turns grim. "But I was suspicious enough to start snooping on him."

"What'd you find out?" Gordon asks her.

"Oh, all sorts of things... but nothing that ever made any sense. The Smileys had regular meetings at their house, once a month, for something called the Four-P Club, or the Four Pi Movement. Your mother went to them, along with her friend... oh dear, what's her name? *Janice*. Sometimes they all wore black robes and carried around candles in the backyard, but aside from that, I never saw anything very strange going on."

"No more dog murders?"

"None that I'm aware of. But there *were* more dog killings taking place elsewhere. I've saved all the newspaper articles." Helen gets up and goes to her desk, returning with a pair of black cat's-eye reading glasses and a handful of tightly rolled and rubber-banded newspaper clippings.

Helen puts on her glasses and squints at the first unrolled article. It's a Xeroxed copy. "This was, what, back around 1973 that this happened? Some of these articles I found go all the way back to 1968 or '69. It seems there were a lot of dogs being found skinned alive not all that far from here, in places like San Jose, Santa Cruz, and Los Gatos. All the dogs were either German shepherds or Doberman pinschers. Here, in this article, is what the director of the Santa Cruz animal shelter had to say about it." Helen primly reads:

"Whoever is doing this is a real expert with a knife. The skin is cut away without even marking the flesh. And the really strange thing is that these dogs have been drained of blood."

"It sounds like they were being used in ritual sacrifices," Gordon says.

"Well, I *did* run across a few isolated reports of that," Helen says. "Some people swore that the dogs' blood was being drunk by a cult of

Satanists up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Supposedly there were some human sacrifices taking place up there, too, on some kind of a dragon-festooned altar. But no one took those reports seriously—and by about 1974, at least, the dog sacrifices seemed like they'd ended. But then they started up again in 1976 and '77—in New York City this time. Over eighty German shepherds and Dobermans were found there skinned and drained of blood in the exact same way. It was right around the same time as those 'Son of Sam' murders."

"You think there's a connection?" Twinker asks her.

"I don't know what I think," Helen says, removing her glasses. "All I know for sure is that Doctor Smiley and Gordon's mother were here in Kingsburg that whole time. They never once traveled to New York, not even on vacation."

"So my mom wasn't the real Son of Sam," Gordon concludes.

"No. At least you can say that much for her," Helen says, pursing her lips. "She's never liked me very much, has she?"

"No, but don't feel bad," Gordon says. "She may not like you, but she absolutely *despises* me."

"Gordon, don't say that..." Twinker says. "No mother could think that about her own son. Especially one like you."

Gordon only says, "You haven't met my mother."



"God, what a strange world we live in..." Twinker says to Gordon out in front of Helen's house after they've said their good-byes. She glances over at the Smileys' green, well-fertilized lawn and their empty driveway next door, saying, "Sometimes I don't like being here much."

When they step into the street, they see a gleaming, sky-colored Bentley Corniche convertible parked up the street in front of Gordon's house. Jimmy, Skip, and D.H. are standing around it, looking aimless and bored. When they see Gordon and Twinker they wave and head up the street to greet them.

"Where've you guys been?" Skip asks. "We've been looking all over for you."

"We were just visiting Gordon's *abuela*," Twinker says. "She's really sweet."

"I guess you guys had no trouble finding Jimmy," says Gordon.

"Sirhan! My man!" shouts D.H., slapping a high-five to shyly grinning Jimmy.

"You were awesome in there," Gordon says, shaking Jimmy's hand. "Where'd you learn to shoot blanks like that?"

"Bite me, Crash..." says Jimmy. "And pack your bags. We're taking a road trip."

"How come?"

"Lloyd will explain it to you in the car."

"Lloyd's with you guys?" But Gordon can already see that he is. Lloyd's fat red face is slouched down low behind the wheel of the Bentley. Gordon missed him at first because the car is right-hand drive and he wasn't looking for anyone on what he normally thinks of as the passenger side.

"Dude, you and Jimmy have had the CIA messin' inside your skulls," says Skip, giving him a little preview of the conversation to come.

"Lloyd knows a deprogrammer over at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur—one of his old Mason buddies—Doctor Felix or somebody," says Jimmy. "I can't really explain it to you the way Lloyd can. But if everything goes right, this Doctor Felix guy should be able to straighten us out over the weekend. Otherwise, we're screwed. We could go off at any time."

D.H. drops into a crouch, pointing an imaginary gun at Skip's chest. "*Eat lead, muthafucka!*" he shouts wildly, mimicking Jimmy's earlier assassination attempt.

Skip mimes death throes, or a shiveringly intense orgasm.

"Yeah, and if you think I'm bad," Jimmy says to Gordon, "you could be, like, ten times worse. Lloyd says they've been teaching you how to kill people with your mind."

"Right. A psychic killer." Saying that in front of his friends causes Gordon to feel a small jolt of pride, which he instantly nullifies with self-deprecation: "I was also programmed to masturbate myself to death if I start remembering too much of my training."

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“*Shit!* I can’t believe you know this stuff already!” Jimmy sounds disappointed.

“Lloyd’s hypnotist buddy told me about it after the show,” Gordon admits. And right there, at that moment, it occurs to him—the *whole thing could be a set-up*.

But a set-up for what? Gordon wonders. *For the insurance policies we all signed? How? And how would that explain what happened to Twinker, who’s not even covered?*

“Stop it! You guys are freaking me the fuck out!” Twinker whines. “Crash, I didn’t hear anything about you being a psychic killer.”

“You were hypnotized, Twinker...” Gordon reminds her. He sees a loose strand of hair curving across the pale skin of her bare shoulder and he feels a rush of almost paternal tenderness toward her (*paternal in the good sense—not in the way her own father abused her...*). He also feels an overwhelming urge to protect her. If he really has the ability to kill people with his mind, maybe Twinker’s dad should be first on his list.

And if the deprogrammer at Esalen is for real, Gordon thinks, *Twinker should go with us.*

It’s up to him to figure out what’s real and what isn’t. No one else can do it for him. Maybe this plunge into weirdness and uncertainty is the world’s way of waking him up from the dream of life by forcing him to use his soul’s intuition.

Self-conscious but resolved, Gordon walks over to the Bentley to say hello to Lloyd. The convertible top is down, revealing a buttery, biscuit-colored leather interior with a bird’s-eye maple dash. “Nice car...” Gordon says.

“Well, well... *Crash Gordon!* So we meet again.” Lloyd reaches a plump hand up from the Bentley’s steering wheel to greet him.

They shake hands warmly—and in that brief clasp Gordon instantly learns everything he needs to know. It’s like a huge, blooming bundle of thought exploding through his mind, throwing off images, names, and phrases everywhere all at once. He suddenly knows Lloyd is there as a friend to assist and guide them and he’s aching to tell them more than he’ll ever be able to explain. Gordon knows they’re all in grave danger, Lloyd included. He knows Doctor Robert H. Felix—**ROB FELIX**—can help. He’s even shown a mental picture of Doctor

Felix (*very old, decrepit...*), which he's certain will turn out to be accurate, if they can just get to Esalen to see him. But getting there is far from a sure thing. They might not make it. The Spirits of Darkness are already massing and will soon be chasing them like a storm.

And this is odd: Although Lloyd and Doctor Felix are their allies in this situation, both of them are deeply, *deeply* corrupt. They're unwitting travelers on the Malâmatî Path—the Path of Blame. A Malâmatî arrogantly displays what is blameworthy and conceals or ignores what is praiseworthy. They're Unholy Fools who make things better by first making things worse.

When Gordon lets go of Lloyd's hand, the thought-bundle disappears. It only lasted for a split-second, and everything it told him is already getting hard to recall. He's had similar experiences with his dreams, wanting to remember some important insight given to him while sleeping, only to have it slip away as soon as he was awake. One of Gordon's favorite artists, Rene Magritte, had something to say about that: "*If the dream is a translation of waking life, waking life is also a translation of the dream.*" It's like old Chuang-Tzu waking up and not knowing if he's a man who dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he's a man. It's tricky, that liminal state....

"So—are you up for a little weekend jaunt?" Lloyd asks him.

"You bet," Gordon says. "I'll go pack my stuff." He takes off toward the house.

"Be quick about it!" Lloyd shouts after him. "It's absolutely imperative that we arrive in Big Sur before sundown."

Inside his bedroom, Gordon quickly packs a backpack with some light clothes, a toothbrush, a roll of cash, and his asthma medication. He also throws in a few books: Barry Hannah's *Ray*, Jim Harrison's *Warlock*, Jacques Vallee's *Messengers of Deception*, and Philip K. Dick's *Flow My Tears*, *The Policeman Said*. For Gordon, having something to read is as important as having clean underwear.

On his way back out the door, he tries to figure out how he's going to get Twinker to go on the trip with them.

"Twinker, D.H., Skip!" Gordon shouts. "You guys should come, too!" *Well, that wasn't exactly smooth or well thought out*, he thinks, *but it might work*.

"Yeah! Party on the beach!" shouts Skip.

"There may not be enough room," Lloyd rather half-heartedly protests.

Just as Gordon is tossing his backpack into the Bentley's open trunk, his mother drives up behind him in her avocado-green Cadillac.

"Where do you think *you're* going, Mister?" she says as the power window on the driver's side rolls down with an electronic groan. Derek is cringing in the backseat.

"We're spending the weekend in Big Sur with Jimmy's uncle," Gordon tells her, simply stating the facts.

"Oh no you're not," she sneers back at him, stepping out of the car. "You get right back in that house, little man. You've got some vacuuming to do."

"You don't understand," Gordon says, standing up to her. "I have to go on this trip. It's important."

"You're not doing any such thing," Cynthia says grimly, about to boil over with her usual rage. "I'm your mother—and if I say you're spending the weekend vacuuming and weeding my flowerbeds, then you damn well better do it."

"You can pull your own damn weeds," Gordon says. "I'm going."

"Don't you *dare* talk back to me like that!" Cynthia howls—her voice choked with fury. She rears back to slap him.

A thought flashes through Gordon's mind. Two inches from his cheek, Cynthia's hand is stayed. Shedding furious tears, she tries to slap him with the other hand. Gordon stops that hand, as well—all without moving a muscle.

"You won't ever hit me again," he says evenly. He stares into his mother's hateful sea-green eyes to make sure she gets the message. Then he closes the Bentley's trunk and tells the others he's ready to leave. Cynthia just gets back into her Cadillac and rolls up the power windows. Derek grins wildly from the backseat and waves goodbye as Cynthia sits there gripping the steering wheel and tensing her jaws.

Gordon picks up, via telepathy, that his mother is contemplating the destruction of Lloyd's Bentley. She wants to crumple it like an aluminum can with the Cadillac's heavy chrome bumper and then go

inside and call Doctor Smiley. Gordon sends a thought back, telling her to stay put, or he'll rupture her internal organs.

How he's able to do these new things is a mystery to him. They feel like abilities he's always had, but couldn't access until Doctor Lemingeller hypnotized him. Then he remembers:

They *are* abilities he's always had—in *his dreams*.

If the Tibetan mystics are right and dreaming is the astral body's way of leaving the physical body behind to travel to other realms—to have an out-of-body experience, or OBE, as some call it—then Gordon has known how to engage in telepathy and telekinesis all along. Maybe his physical body is starting to learn from his astral body's example. Maybe instead of using only 10% of his brain's potential, Doctor Lemingeller somehow, inadvertently, hypnotized him into using more of it.

"That was so cool!" D.H. says, patting Gordon's back as they all climb into the Bentley. "So I guess that psychic killer stuff is true."

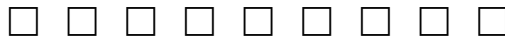
I guess it is, thinks Gordon. How else would I know how to rupture my mother's aorta and spleen?

"You should've made her head explode," Jimmy says. "That would've been rad."

"Let's not make any rash suggestions," Lloyd says as he starts the Bentley's engine. "Our friend Gordon is in a fragile, highly volatile state."

"Actually, I'm feeling pretty good right now," Gordon says, sitting up front next to Lloyd, enjoying the breeze as they pull away from the curb and pick up speed. The Cadillac doesn't follow them.

"You were right about your mom," Twinker leans forward to tell Gordon from the backseat. "God, what a total bitch!"



"There's nothing quite like motoring in an open Bentley at full and proper speed," Lloyd says, donning a pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses as the Bentley tools along past dairy farms, broken-down barns, and dusty green grape vineyards just outside of Kingsburg on Conejo Avenue.

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Lloyd smacks his fat lips in the turbulent breeze and widens his nostrils to inhale a bracing whiff of cow flatulence. His voice deepens in the malodorous bovine smog, turning orotund as he declaims: “With the top down, there comes an almost irresistible urge to burst into some wild war song, greater even than the immortal song of Roland.”

“Yes, utterly,” Gordon concurs, humoring him.

“I’m not sure I’ve heard that immortal Roland guy’s song before,” D.H. pipes up from the backseat, where he’s crushed between Jimmy and Skip.

“Yeah, could you hum a few bars?” Twinker asks, prodding Lloyd with her tiny fist from her perch on Skip’s lap.

“I’ll do you one better...” Lloyd punches a cassette into the Bentley’s tape deck. The distinctive voice of one of their favorite malcontent singer-songwriters bellows from the speakers.

“Ah... the song of Warren Zevon—” D.H. observes with satisfaction—“the immortal ‘Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner.’”

“I thought you might enjoy that,” Lloyd says. He turns up the volume and starts to sing along. Everyone else soon joins in:

*His comrades fought beside him - Van Owen and the rest
But of all the Thompson gunners, Roland was the best
So the CIA decided they wanted Roland dead
That son-of-a-bitch Van Owen blew off Roland’s head*

*Roland the headless Thompson gunner
Norway’s bravest son
Time, time, time
For another peaceful war
But time stands still for Roland
‘Til he evens up the score*

They keep it up until the final enigmatic line: “Patty Hearst heard the burst of Roland’s Thompson gun and bought it.” As the song segues into Lou Reed’s “Coney Island Baby” Lloyd turns down the stereo and says:

ANAMNESIS

"I'm sure you're all aware that CIA mind control programming played a large role in the kidnapping of Patty Hearst. Or did you not know that?"

"We did the fuck not!" Jimmy shouts with something approaching glee as they pass a hay-littered flatbed truck transporting migrant workers. Some of the workers shout obscenities back at Jimmy and wave.

"Yeah, we'd love to hear you explain that one for us," Gordon says. "Especially since CIA mind control programming has been on our minds a lot lately."

"It's inside your minds, fucking with you," Skip clarifies.

"Does anyone recall that famous photo of Patty Hearst in front of the Symbionese Liberation Army's seven-headed cobra symbol?" Lloyd asks them. "You know the one I'm talking about: she's wearing a black knit beret and she has an M-1 carbine slung across her chest."

"Oh, man!" Skip groans. "I had the biggest crush on Patty Hearst back then."

"Skip, weren't you about six?" Twinker asks him, laughing.

"More like seven or eight," says Skip, "but I was—what's the word?"

"Precocious?" Lloyd suggests.

"Warped?" says Twinker.

"Infatuated," D.H. says, speaking from personal experience.

"Right! I was infatuated with her," says Skip. "I wanted to go fight the SLA and kidnap Patty back. I used to daydream that once she saw how much I loved her, she'd hide out with me in my bedroom and just kiss and hug me for months. Then—after she turned back into a nice, normal rich girl again—I'd help her surrender to the police at a big press conference. Her mom and dad would be bawling their eyes out, saying, 'Thank you, Skip, for saving our baby!' while everyone else on TV, like Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather, talked about how big a hero I was."

"You might've had your chance," says Lloyd, grinning. "It's a known fact that Patty Hearst passed right through Kingsburg on Highway 99 when the SLA was making its migration from the Bay Area down to Los Angeles."

"All you needed was a machine gun, Skippy," Jimmy says. "You could've taken 'em on."

"Patty used a rather photogenic little M1 carbine to rob the Hibernia Bank," says Lloyd, free-associating. "Later, she fired it at security guards in a sporting goods store to help her comrades escape after they shoplifted a pair of tube socks. Bland, spoiled, self-regarding Patty—nineteen-year-old heiress to the Hearst family fortune—transformed into the revolutionary guerrilla girl, Tania. Curious, isn't it? How did that happen? Does anyone have a clue?"

"They brainwashed her," Jimmy says, parroting the standard newscaster's theory.

"Yes, but where did the SLA learn their brainwashing techniques?" Lloyd asks. "Did you ever stop to think about that? Those techniques were rather sophisticated for the time. Brutal... but sophisticated. For forty days, the SLA kept Patty in a tiny closet, which functioned as a sensory deprivation chamber. She was also deprived of food and sleep—and she was frequently raped. She thought she might be killed at any time."

"Poor Patty!" Twinker says.

"Yes, poor Patty..." says Lloyd. "Is it any wonder she started to moon after her captors? It's well known among the intelligence community that a deranged sort of unconscious complicity is found in victims of kidnapping and ritual abuse—a passive cooperation in one's own degradation. *Stockholm syndrome*, they call it now. But how did the SLA know that? Any guesses?"

A collective shrug. "Maybe they read about in a book somewhere," Gordon says. If he had to brainwash someone, that's how he'd go about it.

"Donald DeFreeze was just a poor, black, functionally illiterate street criminal before his transformation into 'Cinque'—the founder and leader of the SLA. I doubt he had a library card," Lloyd says. "And I seriously doubt he came up with the SLA's communiqués on his own. One of my favorites—the one that gave the game away for me—was their revolutionary slogan, 'Death to the Fascist Insect that preys upon the Life of the People!' When I saw that, I just knew... the SLA was a creation meant to serve that Fascist Insect, and when their

usefulness was at its end that same Fascist Insect would be biting off the SLA's head."

"Like a praying mantis after it has sex. *Nice...*" says Jimmy.

"I always thought it was kind of extreme," Skip says, "the way the LAPD ganged up on the SLA in that crappy little house in Compton and burned it to the ground while they fired about nine thousand bullets into it. I mean, they weren't even sure if Patty was in there or not. It seemed pretty ruthless."

"It was meant to appear ruthless," Lloyd says. "The SLA represented everything Middle America has been taught to fear: free love, black militancy, women's liberation, and rebellion against an unjust system. Stir all that up with some Communist-sounding rhetoric and kick things off with the assassination of a popular school superintendent and you've got an organization that seems to be just begging to go down in flames. Their termination was used as an example. But what most people don't realize is that the SLA had been designed to serve as that example right from the beginning. It was only one in a series of covert operations intended to disrupt and discredit the New Left and to bring closure to the Woodstock era."

"So who's the Fascist Insect?" Gordon wants to know.

"Well..." Lloyd huffs, "the CIA, of course... and those shadowy figures behind the CIA—and all the other alphabet agencies—who run the show." Lloyd gives a wink and a nudge to Gordon and mummurs: "The Anunnaki. Remember them?"

The Anunnaki... Gordon thinks. *Where have I heard that before?* He gets a brief mental image of a corporate boardroom full of pissed-off lizardpeople. Human meat and gore spatters blue velvet curtains and mahogany-paneled walls.

"The Anu-*what?*" D.H. asks from the backseat.

"Never mind..." Lloyd says. "Here's how it worked: Donald DeFreeze was an informant for the LAPD's Public Disorder Intelligence Unit from 1967 until 1969, when he was charged with armed robbery and sent up to Vacaville State Prison. For the next two years during his confinement, DeFreeze met twice a week with a CIA psychological warfare expert named Colston Westbrook, who'd served as an advisor to both the Korean CIA and the South Vietnamese Special Police Branch. Westbrook happened to be black, and at

Vacaville he used the Black Cultural Association as a cover to gain the trust of the inmates. But what he was really doing there was conducting mind control experiments for the CIA's MKSEARCH program, under the direction of Doctor James Hamilton."

"No way!" says Skip. "How would you even know that?"

"I have my sources..." Lloyd smirks, "but if you want documentation, you'll find it in the public record. Frank Carlucci, Deputy Director of the CIA, sent a letter dated October 18th, 1978 to Congressman Leo Ryan, admitting that MKSEARCH experiments were being conducted at Vacaville just prior to DeFreeze's stay there. Oh... and it just so happened that Congressman Ryan was assassinated exactly one month later on an airport runway in British Guyana during another CIA operation run amok."

"You're talking about the Jonestown Massacre..." Gordon infers. "Jim Jones, cyanide-flavored Kool-Aid, nine hundred dead—that whole thing?"

"None other," Lloyd says. "It all ties together in a tricksterish, convoluted way. Leo Ryan headed the Free Patty Hearst Movement, which was very active in persuading President Carter to commute Patty's jail sentence early in 1979. Ryan was also co-author of the pending Hughes-Ryan Amendment, which would have subjected all covert CIA operations to Congressional approval for funding. It's extremely fortunate for the CIA that the Hughes-Ryan Amendment died shortly after Leo Ryan did, don't you think?"

"You think the CIA offed him on purpose?" Jimmy asks.

"I do," Lloyd says. "Before the Peoples Temple settled in Jonestown, that same area of Guyana had been the site of a CIA training camp called the Shalom Project. Black mercenary guerillas had been trained there for operations in Angola. And Jim Jones was almost certainly a longtime CIA asset, helping them test-drive new mechanisms of social control. The people of Jonestown didn't commit suicide. They were murdered. What you have to understand is that MKULTRA and other CIA mind control programs didn't stop in 1973, as Richard Helms would have had Congress believe. They just went deeper underground, into prisons, mental institutions, and—most significantly—religious cults like the Peoples Temple. Of course the CIA doesn't care to advertise facts like that."

“Just like they don’t go around bragging about that Westbrook guy being Donald DeFreeze’s handler,” says Gordon. “Can you prove any of this?”

“I can’t,” Lloyd admits. “But it’s exactly how things work, believe me.... It was Colston Westbrook who gave DeFreeze his new guerrilla name—General Field Marshal Cinque Mtume. Westbrook also designed the Naga symbol that would come to represent DeFreeze’s future guerrilla army. When DeFreeze was transferred to a less-secure prison at Soledad, the CIA fixed things so he was able to walk right out of there. As an escaped convict that no one was really looking for, he shackled up with a politically radical lesbian librarian self-dubbed ‘Mizmoon’ and they wrote the SLA’s Codes of War together.”

“Waitta second... what’s a Naga?” Skip asks, a little slow on the uptake. “That cobra-headed thingie?”

“Yes, it’s that cobra-headed thingie...” Lloyd says with surprisingly little scorn. “In southern parts of Asia, the Naga are reputed to be an ancient race of reptilian beings, or serpent-gods, who live in kingdoms beneath the sea, or in vast, cavernous palaces underground. Colston Westbrook would have run across their stone likenesses on his excursions into Korea and South Vietnam.”

Everything from Gordon’s previous conversation with Lloyd suddenly comes flooding back to him: *Nordic aliens, Aryans, Quetzalcoatl, kundalini, neural DNA*.... Gordon says, “Then aren’t the Nagas the same thing as the Anu—”

“Yes,” Lloyd says, cutting him short. “The Naga symbol had many pleasing connotations for the CIA. The Symbionese Liberation Army, after all, was a shadow aspect of that organization, a momentary nightmare transformation that revealed—for those who have eyes to see—the tragic, hydra-headed monster the CIA has become. It must have amused them to make such a pointed reference to their own controllers.”

“Their controllers?” Twinker asks.

“In a very real sense, we’re all victims of mind control on this planet. And it’s our sacred duty, as potentially free spiritual beings, to identify and subvert our would-be controllers,” Lloyd says. “That goes for everyone, from the lowliest bum on the street all the way up to the President of the United States. Donald DeFreeze did his part, in a

crude but fearless way. A few days before his death, he publicly identified Colston Westbrook as a covert agent working for military intelligence and called for his execution. Of course, it was DeFreeze who was executed first.”

“Bummer,” says Skip.

“How’d they get Patty?” Twinker wants to know.

“As I understand it,” Lloyd says, “the CIA or the FBI could have picked up Patty Hearst at any time, but they chose to let her remain free so they could build up their files on potential subversives. When they finally brought her in, she was forced to stand trial for armed robbery, even though she was a victim of kidnapping and obviously wouldn’t have been robbing banks otherwise.”

“That really bit the Big One,” Skip says, still outraged over the callous judicial treatment suffered by his first great love.

“It struck me as payback for Patty’s rebellion against her obscenely rich parents,” says Lloyd. “How it must have galled them to hear their little media princess denouncing them as capitalist pigs enthralled to a corporate police state willing to imprison, torture, and murder millions of innocent people—including herself—in order to maintain power and further their blind agenda of greed and hatred.”

“Way to go, Patty...” Gordon says.

“Well, it was fun while it lasted, but poor Patty had to endure a second round of brainwashing once they had her in prison.” Lloyd glumly shakes his head. “The so-called mind control experts who testified at her trial were themselves all connected in one way or another with the CIA’s MKULTRA and MKSEARCH programs: Margaret Singer, Martin Orne, Robert Lifton, Joly West—all of them. ‘Doctor Jolly’ West, for instance, started off his career in Air Force Intelligence, interviewing American pilots who’d come back from Korea after being captured and brainwashed by the Communist Chinese. He had Top Secret clearance and funding under MKULTRA to study the psychobiology of dissociation. He was a friend of Aldous Huxley, who gave him the bright idea of using LSD combined with hypnosis in his experiments. It also so happens that our ‘Doctor Jolly’ once spent eight hours straight in one of John Lilly’s sensory deprivation tanks. And he has the rare distinction of being the only

person to have ever killed an elephant at the Oklahoma City Zoo with a bad acid trip.”

Jimmy laughs. “The guy sounds like a maniac!”

“Indeed, he’s right up there with Columbia University’s Doctor Paul H. Hoch, who coined the term ‘borderline personality disorder’ and killed a tennis pro named Harold Blauer with an overdose of Army mescaline.”

“Hey, all that reminds me...” says D.H., “I read somewhere that John Lilly used to give hits of acid to dolphins and now the Stanford Research Institute is training them to wear bombs and work as underwater assassins.”

“Dolphin assassins?” says Jimmy. “Would Flipper really do that?”

“It’s a documented fact,” Lloyd states. “Dolphins strapped with explosives have been swimming out to enemy ships and blowing them up ever since the Vietnam War.”

“Dolphins?” Twinker says, appalled. “They do that to dolphins?” Apparently she shares the popular New Age belief that dolphins are super-intelligent, spiritually powerful sea creatures with the potential to enlighten mankind.

“No area is considered off-limits when it comes to U.S. military-funded medical research,” Lloyd explains to them. “They’ve been responsible for a fantastic farrago of evil. Boys and girls as young as four were given massive doses of LSD and kept on full-blown acid trips for days, weeks, and even months at a time. Look into the case histories of Doctor Lauretta Bender, past-President of the Society of Biological Psychiatry, if you don’t believe me. Over at Yale, Jose Delgado implanted electrodes into an eleven-year-old boy’s brain that made him think he was a girl. The gender-confused young man prattled on endlessly about marrying a doctor—specifically, Doctor Delgado. Radiation experiments were conducted on pregnant mothers, with forged consent forms, resulting in children who died of leukemia before they could start kindergarten. And don’t even get me started on the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment....”

“That sounds like a Van Morrison song,” D.H. jokes.

Instantly catching on, Jimmy appropriates the melody from “Tupelo Honey” and sings in a raspy basso profundo:

*His dick stings with Tuskegee Syphilis,
It's some VD of the first degree.*

D.H. produces a dimestore harmonica from his pocket and starts *doot-dooting* along, evoking the mating cries of captive penguins at the Roeding Park Zoo as Jimmy improvises:

*His dick stings with Tuskegee Syphilis,
That's why it hurts... when he pees.*

“You shouldn’t make light of the situation,” Lloyd chides them. “Three-hundred-and-ninety-nine impoverished black men were left untreated for syphilis while being studied for the next twenty years by so-called ‘medical professionals’ in the U.S. Public Health Service. It was a flagrant, concerted violation of medical ethics that ended (so far as we know...) only in 1972. From there it’s not much of a leap to thinking that the medico-military-occult complex might be intentionally deploying AIDS and life-destroying addictive drugs into gay and low income, non-white communities. Dealers were actually *giving away* heroin in places like the Bronx in the mid-to late-sixties.”

“Lloyd, you da man, but *damn!*—you bringin’ us down wit’ all this White Dude conspiracy talk,” Jimmy says as D.H. switches to a honking harmonica blues riff. “You bad as them muthafuckin’ dolphin-exploders.”

“I beg to differ...” Lloyd says, playfully cuffing his jive-talking nephew. “The steady moral blunderings of those ‘dolphin-exploders’ at the Stanford Research Institute far exceed my own relatively minor lapses into disreputable behavior. SRI International, as it’s called these days, is a two-hundred-million-dollar-a-year operation. It’s now the second largest think tank in America. They’ve been working on God only knows how many above-top-secret projects funded by the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the Office of Naval Research. One of those projects—which I’m privy to—might be of particular interest to you, Gordon, since it involves psychics and remote viewing.”

“Is that how I learned to do all this crap?” Gordon asks.

"It's more likely you cultivated your paranormal abilities right here..." Lloyd says, pointing to a reflective green highway sign coming up on their right: *Lemoore Naval Air Station / Next Exit*. Darting above the hazy blue horizon—miles away across a fertile, furrowed moonscape harboring toxins from the pesticides and aerospace industry by-products that are incrementally poisoning San Joaquin Valley crops—an F/A-18 Hornet strike-fighter noiselessly descends for a landing. It looks like a tiny, leg-clutching spider spinning a web of billowy silk contrails across the sky.

"Hey, I've been out here before!" Jimmy suddenly remembers. "My dad used to work on the Navy base, before they made him Chief-of-Police."

"My dad works here, too," Twinker says, sounding sulky. "We're not going there, are we?"

"No. Don't worry..." Lloyd assures her, "our business is elsewhere."

"So what's a Navy base have to do with paranormal abilities?" Gordon asks as they pass the Lemoore NAS exit. He's merely curious. He doesn't recall ever having been there.

"If it's all right with you, I'd rather not get into that just yet..." Lloyd says, glancing apprehensively in his rearview mirror. "First, let me tell you a little bit about the remote viewing project at SRI and my friends there, Hal Puthoff and Ingo Swann."

"My name is Swann..." Jimmy sings.

Do-doo-do-doot... D.H.'s harmonica honks.

"I get it on." *Do-doo-do-doot.*

"I'm a remote viewer, baby..." *Doot-do-doot.*

"I can see right through your panties!" *Do-dooooo-do-doot....*

Jimmy howls like a wolf and does some Screamin' Jay Hawkins-inspired witch doctor muttering as a black, early-sixties Lincoln Continental sedan pulls up alongside them in the passing lane. A stout, triple-chinned Asian-featured man wearing a Magritte-style bowler and a spiffy black suit is behind the wheel. From the open window on the passenger side, an emaciated, beak-nosed Egyptian-looking man with a Salvador Dali mustache stares at them with yellowish, protuberant, unblinking eyes. He's wearing a black suit, too.

While D.H. indulges in a frenzied, farting harmonica solo, the Egyptian-looking man leans on the Continental's suicide door and shouts above the highway's din: "You must turn back! Stop interfering in matters that are none of your concern! The fat man tells lies!" His voice is tinny with a weird singsong lilt to it. His face turns sallow with the effort of speaking, as if it's unnatural for him.

"Do you know those guys?" Gordon asks Lloyd.

"It's those damnable Men in Black!" Lloyd grouches, flipping them off with a pudgy middle finger. "*Beasty* little thugs. But there's no cause for alarm. Their vehicle is no match for my powerful Bentley." Lloyd presses on the accelerator and the black Lincoln falls away to their left.

"Whoa, actual Men in Black?" D.H. says, spitting the harmonica from his mouth. "That's so cool!"

"What are Men in Black?" Twinker asks.

"They're aliens in government suits!" Jimmy says giddily, watching over his shoulder as the Lincoln races to catch up with them.

"They go around impersonating government agents, trying to suppress evidence of UFOs and alien involvement in Earth's affairs," Gordon explains.

"It's more complicated than that," Lloyd says. "They're interdimensional entities. More like transhuman trickster figures. They can inhabit our reality, but they only have the energy to do so for a short time. Terrestrial materialization takes the piss right out of them—especially during the light of day. Watch, and you'll see what I mean."

Lloyd takes his foot off the accelerator and allows the black Lincoln to overtake them again. The Asian driver and the Egyptian lean toward them from the open window, yelling threats. Their voices sound like frantic buzzings from a hive of bees: "You've been warned! You punks are headed for big trouble! *You're cruising for a bruising!*" Their skin has turned gluey white, with an eerie blue glow sparkling around the edges.

"Go back to where you came from, you stooges for Lam!" Lloyd shouts back at them. He floors the accelerator again and the Lincoln

falls back. It starts to shimmy as its big motor roars for one final assault. Then, like a fast-fading mirage, it disappears.

“Holy shit!” says Skip. “Did you see that?”

Everyone confirms that they did. Everyone, that is, except for Gordon—who has slumped forward with his head between his knees, deep in narcoleptic sleep.

Gordon dreams he’s dashing naked along a tree-lined suburban street with a long-stemmed red rose clenched between his teeth. A white marble statue is chasing after him, effortlessly gliding above the ground as if it’s mounted on a swift and agile little hovercraft. The statue has a murderous female energy to it. It appears to be the Roman goddess, Diana, pulling her hunting bow taut to launch a poisoned arrow at him. Her eyes are full of hatred and Gordon is afraid to look in them, for fear of being hypnotized. With just the barest glance over his shoulder, he sees the marble turning to red, raw flesh. The first arrow whistles past his ear. Gordon leaps across hedges, climbs over white picket fences, hides behind old hemlock trees, dodging arrows as the statue bellows for his blood. All that running is wearing him out. His heart is racing. He’s gasping for breath. Meanwhile, the statue has transformed into a glowering James Dean wearing the red windbreaker from *Rebel Without A Cause*. Gordon senses this change has made the statue vulnerable. He grabs one of the fallen arrows and leaps out from behind a tree to jab the arrow’s tip into James Dean’s neck. The arrow’s poison turns Dean’s face back into stone. His eyes take on an insectile appearance—like a praying mantis, or those little Grey aliens at the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The statue telepathically begs Gordon to dig his thumbs into two pressure points on either side of its marble nose, just below its black, emotionless eyes. Doing so will reverse the effects of the poison. In an act of compassion, Gordon does just that and the dream ends.

As Gordon rises to consciousness, breathing hard, his mind is already making associations. *Naked* (“as the day he was born”). *Seeking love* (the red rose). *Diana* (the Moon Goddess—with all that implies in the world according to Lloyd...). The statue’s eyes remind him of his mother’s fierce gaze. The arrows could have been his mother’s projected thoughts of rage and hatred. Their prick brings about paralysis, dissociation, sleep—like the poison needles in fairy tales. *And*

James Dean? Probably his mother's animus—the male side of her psyche—*where she's vulnerable*. Sending one cruel thought back her way (“*Stay put, or I'll rupture your internal organs...*”) was enough to prevent her from bashing in Lloyd's Bentley.

Or is James Dean somehow related to Jimmy? And what was the point of that alien-insect stuff, anyway? he wonders, now fully awake.

“Rise and shine...” says Lloyd as Gordon sits up and stretches his arms and legs.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” Twinker says, leaning forward to kiss Gordon's cheek. “Did you have any good dreams?”

“It was more like a nightmare. About my mother, I think,” Gordon says, getting razzed by his friends in the backseat. He turns to Lloyd: “You said something about the Men in Black being stooges for Lam. What's that supposed to mean?”

Lloyd concentrates on his driving. “A slip of the tongue,” he says, “but I may as well explain.... *Lam* is the Tibetan word for the Way or the Path—a rough equivalent of the Chinese word, *Tao*. And *Lama*, of course, means ‘He who Goeth’—the one who follows the Path. It was also a title of the ancient gods of Egypt. But Lam has a more precise meaning for the adepts of the Ordo Templi Orientis. It refers to a particular class of interdimensional entities. Aleister Crowley first summoned one of these Lam entities during a series of magickal invocations called the *Amalantrah Workings*, which took place in a Manhattan apartment building on Central Park West in the winter of 1918. I believe the building was the Dakota—where John Lennon was shot—although I could be mistaken.”

“That's the same place where they shot *Rosemary's Baby*,” Gordon blurts out, experiencing a spasm of *déjà vu*.

“Someone's baby was shot there, too? What a pity!” Lloyd smirks.

“You know what I mean...” Gordon says.

“Indeed, I do.” Lloyd reaches for his wallet. “Anyway, as I was saying, Crowley was able to invoke one of these Lam ‘intelligences’ to manifest physically by creating an interdimensional energy portal—a sort of rip in the space-time continuum that allows passage into our world. And apparently this Lam entity was obliging enough to sit for a portrait. Crowley exhibited the Lam portrait at his *Dead Souls* exhibition

in Greenwich Village in 1919. He swore then—and to his dying day—that the portrait was drawn from real life. I carry a tiny reproduction of it here, in my wallet. Care to see it?” He opens his fat wallet and passes it to Gordon.

“You carry a picture of Lam around in your wallet?”

“So I never had children...” Lloyd says with a shrug. “Don’t give me guff.”

Everyone in the backseat leans forward to peer over Gordon’s shoulder as he looks at Lloyd’s wallet. An elementary school photo of Jimmy is displayed in the wallet’s left ID window—his puckered grin, freckles, and devilishly crossed eyes set off against a tacky blue backdrop—while in the center ID window there’s a Xeroxed portrait of a spindly grey humanoid creature with a tiny nose and mouth, no ears, and an enormous, bulbous head.



“This Lam guy looks just like one of those drawings done by people who’ve been abducted by UFOs,” Gordon says, stating the obvious.

“Just like the Greys,” D.H. agrees, “except for the eyes.” The eyes in the drawing look almost human: beady, wise, and weirdly hypnotic.

“Well observed...” Lloyd commends them. “The Lam’s eyes are almost always covered by large, black, almond-shaped lenses—the alien equivalent of sunglasses, in case you didn’t know.... See, the Lam entities, or the Greys... call them what you will... spend most of their

time in darkness. Their normal habitat is deep underground. Their eyes have adapted to that environment and are thus extremely sensitive to light. Those black lenses they wear protect them from our sun, while at the same time allowing them to see in the blackest night. In fact, modern military night vision technology was back-engineered from such lenses found on the bodies of dead aliens in the wreckage from the Roswell Crash of 1947.”

“That’s just fuckin’ freaky...” says Skip. “They really found aliens at Roswell?”

“Roswell was only the beginning... there have been several UFO crashes since. Alien bodies are literally stacked up like cordwood at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. You have Jack Parsons and L. Ron Hubbard to thank for that.”

“Because of *The Babalon Working*,” says D.H., remembering.

“The Magick Boner of Saucy Jack!” Jimmy ejaculates in a spontaneous fit of idol worship.

“Right again,” says Lloyd. “Crowley was a responsible magus—despite what the public thinks of him—and after creating the interdimensional portal with a wave of his Magick Rood during the *Amalantrah Workings*, he also took care to close it when he was finished. Not so with Hubbard and Parsons.... They weren’t quite up to Crowley’s level. When they aped the *Amalantrah Workings* with their *Babalon Working* in Pasadena during 1946 and ‘47, they ripped such a large hole in the space-time fabric that it was beyond their ability to repair it. Their portal has remained open, allowing the Greys and other transhuman, interdimensional entities unhindered access to our realm ever since.”

“No wonder California’s so fuckin’ weird,” Gordon says. “They must’ve done it right over Disneyland.”

“Great...” grumbles Skip, “so the next time I get abducted by aliens and bent over for an anal probe, I can blame it on those guys.”

“Or you could blame yourself for looking so sexy,” Twinker teases him.

“There’s an upside,” says Lloyd. “As I see it, contact with these otherworldly entities is a necessary, if unpleasant, part of our spiritual

and evolutionary growth. After all, it's the predator that forces its prey to evolve—or perish.”

“Wait—” says D.H., “you’re saying the aliens are predators?”

“As always, it’s more complicated than that...” says Lloyd. “What I’m suggesting is that the next stage in our evolution might not be physical, but instead, an evolution of consciousness. And since we live in a predatory universe, Nature may have designed, in her infinite wisdom, a predator that can only be detected by using certain desirable traits in our species—such as a highly developed sense of intuition, or psychic abilities. The development of those traits would then be necessary for the survival of the species as a whole. So for the sake of our own evolution, in other words, we should all become aware of these interdimensional entities that I’ve been telling you about. They’re already here, and they’ve been here for a good long while. Our interaction with them is inevitable.

“Of course, our government doesn’t subscribe to that point of view,” Lloyd grouses, “and that’s why the whole business has been kept so hushed up. It’s interesting to note that right after the Roswell Crash—in the same month, actually—the National Security Act was passed, thus paving the way for the creation of a national intelligence agency. I’m talking about the CIA, of course, which was officially chartered in September of 1947. Not everyone knows this, by the way, but the Director of the CIA oversees the entire U.S. intelligence community—including all military agencies—and functions as the President’s principal advisor on most intelligence matters.”

“I’ll bet that really chafes the FBI’s ass,” Jimmy says.

“You can bet the military isn’t too thrilled with the situation, either,” Lloyd says. “Which leads to another odd coincidence from July of 1947 that interests me. When the debris from the Roswell Crash was shipped to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, General Walter Dornberger just happened to be assigned there. General Dornberger had been in charge of the Nazi rocketry program at Peenemünde, where thousands of prisoners had died as forced laborers. He escaped the Nuremberg trials only because he’d been brought to our shores by the CIC under Operation PAPERCLIP.”

“So you’ve got aliens, Nazis, and the CIA all involved in a big cover-up,” Jimmy says. “*Nice.*”

“And the Men in Black are like interdimensional Secret Service agents,” Gordon extrapolates, “maintaining the cover-up with scare tactics and intimidation—or even murder.”

“Something like that...” Lloyd concedes. “The world is a far stranger place than the nightly news would have you think. Expanded awareness is our only clear path for evolution, but counter-evolutionary forces are constantly hijacking our awareness with dullness and distractions. We’ve become like machines controlled by a haphazard series of shocks from outside. When we wake up to our situation and start seeing the bigger picture, it isn’t always pretty.... But if each of us is an immortal spiritual being having a temporal human experience, as I truly believe, then a large part of our experience must have to do with integrating human fears and limitations—and thereby overcoming them. To do that, you need to take a compassionate, eyes-wide-open approach. You have to look at *everything* going on in this world—the good *and* the bad—not just the mundane activities within your own circumscribed sphere.”

“But how do we do that if the government is deliberately keeping things hidden from us?” asks Gordon.

Lloyd huffs and says, “*That*, my dear boy, is where remote viewing comes in.”

A REMOTE VIEW OF REMOTE VIEWING

I'll take Lloyd the next sixty miles to explain what remote viewing is and how it operates, but I'll spare you the dialogue and just summarize his whole mind-warping lecture here:

Lloyd's buddy, Harold "Hal" Puthoff, was responsible for getting the remote viewing program up and running at SRI International in the early seventies. Hal had been a Naval Intelligence officer who'd worked with the NSA at Fort Meade in the sixties, so he was known and trusted by the intelligence community. When Hal took a job at SRI as a laser physicist and started fooling around with parapsychology experiments on the side—with the big dream of demonstrating the reality of paranormal phenomena in SRI's controlled laboratory settings—Hal's CIA-connected friends were there for him, backing him up.

One of those friends was a former CIA agent named Cleve Backster, who liked to hook up houseplants to lie-detection machines and threaten to set them on fire, just to see if he could get a reaction out of them. Initially, Cleve had only wanted Hal to help him zap some ferns with laser beams, but when he saw how sincere Hal was about conducting parapsychology experiments of his own, he put Hal in touch with the self-described "psychic guinea pig," Ingo Swann.

A wildly talented psychic, Ingo had been the star of several research projects at the American Society for Psychical Research in New York (right across from the Dakota at 5 West 73rd Street). During a series of experiments at the ASPR that had been designed to see if psychics could perceive the weather in distant cities, Ingo had coined the term "remote viewing" to describe what he was doing.

The experiments went something like this: Phone numbers for the weather bureaus of major cities around the country were put into identical

opaque envelopes. An envelope was chosen at random by a third party and Ingo was told the city's name. He then gave his impressions of the city's weather (without having any prior access to national weather reports in newspapers or on TV). His results were weirdly impressive when feedback from the call to the weather bureaus was reported. Whether Ingo had visited those cities by astral-projection, or somehow tapped into the universal unconscious for his weather reports, no one was certain. But however he was doing it, his so-called "remote viewing" techniques seemed to work.

Cleve Backster persuaded Ingo to phone up Hal Puthoff and the two of them started up a long-distance conversation. They must have hit it off, because on June 4th, 1972, Ingo got on a plane to San Francisco and drove out to SRI International to meet with Hal. It probably helped that they were both gung-ho Scientologists at the time. Hal had just reached Operating Thetan Level III and Ingo was at Operating Thetan Level VII—levels that are only reached after years of "auditing" and the successful completion of many secret (and outrageously expensive) Scientology courses. At OT Level III and beyond, those courses are supposed to confer supernatural powers upon the participants—or so claimed that thieving former Scribe to Jack Parsons and messianic, pathological liar, L. Ron Hubbard.²

For Hal and Ingo's first psychic experiment together, Ingo was asked to remote view and telekinetically manipulate a superconductor-shielded magnetometer in front of a group of skeptical observers at the Stanford University Physics Department. The magnetometer was used for high-energy particle physics experiments. It was buried under layers of mu-metal, copper, aluminum, and three feet of concrete designed to prevent its internal magnetic field from being disturbed by anything larger than a quark. Ingo was able to remote view the interior of the magnetometer and provide accurate descriptions of it right down to a gold alloy plate and a Josephson Junction deep in its electronic guts. He then penetrated its shielded magnetic core with his probing mind, causing fluctuations in the magnetometer's signal output never seen before or since. Hal wrote up the results in a report that was circulated among several dozen scientists and his good friends in the intelligence community.

² Hubbard also claimed that in past lives he'd been an intergalactic walrus, a jilted lover to an alluring red-haired robot, a victim of defenestration from a flying saucer, and "a very happy being who strayed to the planet Nostra 23,064,000,000 years ago."

A REMOTE VIEW OF REMOTE VIEWING

Around that same time, the CIA had found out that the USSR was pouring millions of dollars worth of resources into psychic spying efforts and other projects that delved into what the Soviets called psychoenergetics. Their inspiration had likely come from documents they'd seized after the fall of the Third Reich, mainly from Himmler's Ahnenerbe—the infamous Nazi Occult Bureau. To keep up with the Soviets, the CIA decided they wanted to look into psychic spying, too. After reading Hal's report, several CIA scientists showed up at SRI to watch Ingo identify the contents of sealed boxes in a series of double-blind tests. The objects that went into each box were selected by the scientists themselves and sealed away without anyone else's knowledge. Ingo's descriptions of the contents in the boxes were uncannily accurate (he identified a moth inside a box as "a brown, moving leaf," to cite just one example). The CIA's Technical Services Division ended up offering Hal funding for an eight-month pilot program at SRI to further explore psychic phenomena, starting in January of 1973.

Ingo stayed on board and a senior research physicist from Sylvania who'd heard about the project, Dr. Russell Targ, volunteered for a spot on the team and was accepted.³

Andrija Puharich swung by SRI with the famed spoon-bender, Uri Geller, for six weeks of testing with Hal and Dr. Targ while Ingo was away in New York packing for the move to California. Uri spent his time locked up in a windowless, soundproofed room where he fondled silverware, correctly predicted rolls of dice in a closed box eight out of ten times, and drew

³ In a weird bit of synchronicity that Hal and Ingo likely would've been aware of, L. Ron Hubbard had repeatedly warned against Targs in a taped lecture from 1952 for sale at the Church of Scientology under the title: "Electropsychometric Scouting: Battle of the Universes." That same lecture encapsulated much of the material later taught to the initiates of OT Level III. In it, Hubbard described Earth as a prison planet ruled by evil "entheta beings"—or *Targs*—who dumped their enemies here in exile. He claimed that 75 million years ago the twisted Galactic Confederacy warlord, Xenu, along with a team of silver-booted psychiatrists, had drugged all of the Earth's prisoners into insensibility during a tax inspection ruse, then had them frozen like fish sticks and blown up by H-bombs hurled into active volcanoes. Their blown-up souls supposedly stick to present-day earthlings like etheric mucus. According to Hubbard's lurid sci-fi version of Gnosticism, Targs had created Christianity as a method of mind control for the masses. As a sort of added bonus, Christianity's perceived enemy, godless Communism, had been "their great success." Hubbard could also be heard on the tape yipping that "anybody who thinks in this society is immediately attacked; you're surrounded by Targs!" But by almost all accounts, Dr. Targ was a sweetheart of a guy....

reproductions of pictures as they were being drawn by observers outside the room. Many of those psychic high jinks were captured on film.

After Ingo's return to SRI, the team used up the first five months of the pilot program trying to nail down certain willed effects of telekinesis ("remote influencing" is what they call that now). The effects, while at times impressive, proved in the end to be uncontrollable—or "intrinsically spontaneous." Ingo suggested they go back to remote viewing, but Hal and Dr. Targ were stymied as to how they could make remote viewing seem like something the CIA would want to invest in. Plenty of reliable ways to find out about Moscow's weather already existed. But then, during a visit to SRI, the famed UFO researcher, Jacques Vallee, made an inspiring suggestion. "All you need is an address," he said. Ingo took that suggestion and came up with the idea of using coordinates. If he was given just the longitude and latitude of a target—in degrees, minutes, and seconds—that information gave away almost nothing. He could then retrieve impressions about the target without any preconceived notions—or "front-loading"—getting in his way. He would be able to spy anywhere on the globe (and beyond). It was perfect.

And it was perfectly irrational, said Hal and Dr. Targ. Geographic coordinates weren't part of the natural world; they were just an arbitrary way for humans to divide up spaces on the globe. But Ingo pointed out that remote viewing didn't seem rational on its surface, either, but it worked—so they agreed to try it.

Ingo went into the same windowless, soundproofed room that Uri Geller had made use of, and Hal and Dr. Targ picked ten coordinates off a map next door. In the session that followed, Ingo reeled off one correct response after another, describing basic features like "ice" for a coordinate in the Arctic region, "Ocean. I see Spain off in the distance," for a coordinate in the sea off the coast of the Iberian Peninsula, and so on.... Concerned that telepathic overlay might be involved and Swann was only reading their minds, Hal asked his CIA buddies to send some double-blind coordinates—locations that neither the two scientists, nor Ingo, would know anything about. The CIA obliged and on May 29th, 1973, Ingo was given the coordinates for the first official CIA target.

At the start, Ingo just saw a cabin in the woods. He didn't sense anything very interesting there, but Hal told him to look around. Something had to be there. So Ingo looked around and found something about a half-mile away from the coordinate. It seemed to be a hidden military installation.

A REMOTE VIEW OF REMOTE VIEWING

Ingo was able to sketch out a fairly detailed map. He had a strong impression of something underground, like a former missile base. (It was actually a secret microwave interception post and code-breaking facility located near Sugar Grove, West Virginia, manned by the Navy and the NSA). The CIA reported back that Ingo's results were accurate in every detail, and even the relative distances on the map were to scale.

But that wasn't all.... A few days later, Hal received a call from Pat Price, a fellow Scientologist (OT Level IV) who was offering to have his skills tested. Hal was a little reluctant, but "on an impulse" gave Pat the coordinates of the CIA target without telling him anything else.

On June 4th, 1973, Hal received Pat Price's five-page response, which went into even greater detail than Ingo's session. According to a CIA source, not only were Pat's descriptions of the physical layout of the site accurate, but he even went so far as to provide "a list of project titles associated with current and past activities, including one of extreme sensitivity." He also came up with the facility's code name ("Hay Stack").

With the CIA's official confirmation of his skills, Pat Price was invited to join the SRI remote viewing team. At the same time, the CIA decided to renew its financial support for another two years. Coordinate Remote Viewing (CRV) was deemed worthy of a deeper look.

(Just for the record: The CIA funding for remote viewing dried up in 1976 due to fallout from the agency's role in the Watergate break-in. However, new funding arrived shortly thereafter from a curious source—the Foreign Technology Division at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, where crashed UFOs and dead aliens have been allegedly sent for study.)

Over the course of thousands of double-blind CRV sessions in the years that followed, Ingo Swann became convinced that remote viewing was an innate method of perception that transcended the physical constraints of normal cognitive awareness based on what we can see, hear, taste, smell, or touch. He believed it was an ability that everyone possesses—a sixth sense. He also believed people could be taught how to use it. But first he had to explain to his own satisfaction how remote viewing worked.

He suspected it had something to do with David Bohm's ideas on the Explicate and Implicate Order in his book, Wholeness and the Implicate Order. As Bohm explains it, the Explicate Order is the interplay of energy and matter that we understand from our five senses—the world of trees, rocks, Volkswagen Beetles, gravity, frying bacon, and so on. It's the realm of

classical physics as described by Sir Isaac Newton. The Implicate Order, on the other hand, is the realm of quantum physics that operates below the surface of the world that we see every day. It's the realm described by Einstein, Bohr, Feynman, and others.

The Implicate Order is a domain of high weirdness, where atomic and subatomic particles go whizzing about conducting their often-bizarre business. Sometimes they act like particles and at other times they act like waves, depending on who's looking. They also sometimes exhibit the peculiar behavior known as nonlocality—when pairs of quantum particles that have once been “entangled” continue to exchange information and act upon it instantaneously, regardless of their later separation in time and space. This is all wrapped up in Bell's Theorem, but basically, what it means is that even if those particles were to travel to opposite ends of the universe, each of them would still be able to instantly know what the other particle was doing—which would seem to violate the speed of light, among other things. This “spooky action at a distance,” in Einstein's phrase, has led some metaphysicians to speculate that all regions of space-time are nonlocal, because when our three dimensions of space and one dimension of time are observed from a higher dimensional order, they'll appear complete in an “eternal now” where all events—past, present, and future—can be accessed simultaneously.

Ingo was pretty sure that nonlocality played a large role in remote viewing: “The Explicate and Implicate Order are available to human consciousness at all times,” he was known to say. Most people focus exclusively on the Explicate Order, but Ingo taught remote viewers to focus on the Implicate Order, where we're all just a swirl of atoms dancing behind the veil of maya, in a frequency domain where mind and matter are inextricably linked.

By 1979, the Defense Intelligence Agency was sending specially selected Army personnel from Project GRILL FLAME to meet with Ingo at SRI so they could learn remote viewing. Ingo had by then organized his thoughts on the subject into a workable teaching methodology.

Ingo's theory was that remote viewers receive information not from the target itself, but from a place called the Matrix—a sort of nonlocal, transdimensional arena where all the data in the universe resides, unlimited by time and space. He described the Matrix as an infinite archive of “information points” which can be located and accessed by coordinates provided to remote viewers, in much the same way that data files are located

A REMOTE VIEW OF REMOTE VIEWING

and accessed by electronic addresses in a searchable computer database. Once located, that information can be downloaded into the viewer's subconscious mind along a sort of mental radio wave that Ingo called the Signal Line. The subconscious mind, in turn, acts like a radio receiver, decoding or "unpacking" the information carried along the Signal Line.

Human consciousness has the potential to be on-line with the Matrix at all times in the Implicate Order. The trick to remote viewing is to bring the Signal Line's decoded data up from the viewer's subconscious mind, past the liminal threshold, and into conscious awareness. Ingo had teased out many ways to do that over the years—and most of those methods could be taught—but a lot still seemed to depend on the natural talents of individual viewers. It was kind of like learning to play John Philip Sousa tunes on a tuba. Some people seemed to have more of a knack for it than others, but with practice almost anyone could do it.

What Ingo didn't realize right away was that the practice of remote viewing was the equivalent of switching on a beacon within the Matrix. That metaphorical beacon drew information along the Signal Line toward itself. But it also attracted a lot of other strange things—the interdimensional equivalent of moths and June bugs... and more dangerous entities, as well.

MORE ANAMNESIS

“So that’s how the Men in Black knew how to find us?” Gordon asks. “I had my beacon switched on?”

“Doesn’t it make sense?” Lloyd says as he guides the Bentley into the sweeping curve in the road that takes them from Highway 41 onto Highway 46. “In the dimensions beyond this world, ‘Energy is eternal delight,’ as William Blake told us. And as I’ve said before, certain entities *feed* upon our energy—especially our negative emotions. It takes a great deal of energy to consciously break free from our three-dimensional, material realm into the interdimensional, nonlocal realm of the Matrix. So naturally, whenever you do, you’re going to be a star attraction, so to speak.”

“Then Ingo Swann must’ve had energy-sucking vampires all over his sorry ass,” Jimmy surmises.

“He did,” Lloyd confirms. “It’s my belief that when Ingo first began his remote viewing experiments at the American Society for Psychical Research on West 73rd Street, next to the Dakota building, the psychic energy that he summoned to break through to the Matrix for the first time was so great that it attracted a huge swarm of interdimensional entities—our friends the Lam, included. I also believe that during that massive swarming, some of them found a tiny stitch coming loose in the seams of the space-time fabric that Aleister Crowley had ripped open and later sewn back up in 1918 during the *Amalantrab Workings*. The entities worried that seam until it finally unraveled sometime in 1973 or ‘74—and then they poured through it.”

“Holy crap! That would explain why John Lennon saw a UFO over New York in 1974,” D.H. says, making his own intuitive leap.

“He wrote about it in the liner notes to the *Walls and Bridges* album,” he explains to everyone. “You know... the one with ‘#9 Dream’ and ‘Whatever Gets You Thru the Night’—which is the theme song for *Saturday Night Live* these days.”

“There’s more to the story than just that...” Lloyd says. “Uri Geller met with John Lennon almost every week during the late-seventies at a place called Café La Fortuna, one block away from John’s apartment in the Dakota. According to Uri, one day over coffee John told him that he’d been asleep with Yoko when he suddenly awoke to see a blazing white light shining under the door to their bedroom. He thought someone was out there with a searchlight. When he opened the door, he saw four spindly grey figures standing in a brilliant white radiance. John described them as ‘bug-like’ creatures. ‘Big bug eyes and little bug mouths.’ He claimed they were scuttling around him like roaches.”

“He must’ve been high,” Jimmy scoffs.

“He swore to Uri that he wasn’t,” Lloyd says.

“Then maybe he was having a flashback,” Skip suggests. “Wasn’t ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ about all the LSD he’d been taking?”

“Didn’t you see bugs the last time *you* dropped acid?” Twinker asks him.

“That was the Bumble Bee Tuna bee,” Skip says. “That’s totally different.”

“Don’t forget how you partied down with Count Chocula and almost choked on the Ty-D-Bol Man,” D.H. reminds him, smirking.

“Lick my Scrotum, Douglas.”

“Gentlemen, please...” Lloyd says. “They were Lam entities, obviously, and John Lennon wasn’t hallucinating. In fact, they gave something to him—tangible proof of their visitation. After they guided him into a tunnel of white light, something happened that he was unable to recall later, and then he woke up on top of the bedcovers next to Yoko with a smooth, metallic, ellipsoid-shaped object in his hand. He gave it to Uri not long before he died, saying, ‘You have it.... It’s too weird for me. If it’s my ticket to another planet, I don’t want to go there.’”

“Did Uri Geller ever have that thing analyzed?” Gordon wants to know.

“No. He says he doesn’t want to run the risk of finding out it’s just something that was manufactured in Denmark. I don’t blame him.... The Lam are tricksters, first and foremost. It would be just like them to try to pass off some phony trinket as the ultimate extraterrestrial evidence. Isn’t it enough that they managed to get John Lennon to believe in their existence?”

“Elvis, too, probably,” D.H. mutters. “And *definitely* Jimi Hendrix.”

“One interesting thing to note about these alien sightings we’ve been talking about—in 1918, 1947, and 1974—is that they’ve all tended to occur towards the end of American involvement in foreign wars. I think there’s a reason for that...” Lloyd says. “When Aleister Crowley first summoned the Lam in 1918, some 16 million people had recently died in World War I, and an additional 20-odd million were dead or dying from the Spanish Flu Pandemic. For the Lam, that translated into quite an abundant energy banquet. At least one of them, as you know, had enough surplus energy to crossover into our realm to sit for a portrait. And in 1947, after World War II, it was much the same story: 60 million dead—about three percent of the world’s population. Again, the Lam feasted on human fear and suffering. When Jack Parsons and L. Ron Hubbard summoned them that second time around, they had energy enough to arrive in style, piloting their flying saucers. When one of those pilots ran out of juice over the skies of Nevada, the result was the Roswell Crash. Since then, the Lam come and go as they please, but I think you’ll find they always appear most readily after times of earthly turmoil.”

“Like in 1975, after the fall of Saigon in the Vietnam War,” Gordon concludes.

“With a big assist from the ‘Killing Fields’ of Cambodia, courtesy of the Khmer Rouge,” Lloyd appends. “This cycle of war and subsequent alien contact seems to happen every 28 years or so. I’d expect the next cycle to start up sometime just after the turn of the new millennium. Which has me wondering: *Could all this be intended?* Are we being harvested? Is each new generation being mown down like a crop of winter wheat so the aliens can energetically devour us?”

“God, Lloyd, could you get any more depressing?” Twinker complains.

“Yeah, you’re even worse than that guy who wrote *War of the Worlds*—Orson Welles,” Skip says.

“H.G. Wells,” Gordon corrects him. “Orson Welles adapted it into a radio script.”

“I thought that was George Orwell,” Skip argues, still trying to show-off his half-assed knowledge of literature.

“George Orwell wrote *1984*—”

“—which might also be considered germane to our conversation,” says Lloyd, “especially the coda: ‘If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face... for ever.’ But let’s not go there. What I’m really curious to know is: Did the Lam plan this state of perpetual warfare from the very beginning? And if so, is our government collaborating with them?” Lloyd has apparently only *begun* to get depressing.

“What I want to know,” says Skip, “is if John Lennon got the anal probe when those aliens abducted him.”

“Are you sure you’re not gay, Skip?” Jimmy asks him. “Because you’re really hung up on this anal probe thing.”

“He’s not gay,” Twinker assures everyone.

“How could he fuck his mom if he was gay?” D.H. asks rhetorically.

“That anal probe you’re so interested in is actually an electro-genital stimulation device,” Lloyd interjects. “It causes men to ejaculate. A similar device is used on minks and certain farm animals for artificial breeding purposes.”

“I know a guy who did the same thing to roosters with his thumbs,” says Gordon, recalling the rewarding career path that opened up to Johnny Hoss following his pursuit of higher education. “So in other words,” he says, “you’re telling us a bunch of bug-eyed John Lennons might be running around somewhere on the other side of the galaxy.”

“Or more likely, right here on Earth,” Lloyd says. “Aliens have been breeding with us since the dawn of our earliest recorded history.

That much is certain. You only need to look to the Biblical story of the Nefilim, or the Epic of Gilgamesh.”

“Or *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, starring David Bowie,” D.H. says. “Don’t forget that one.”

“Okay, so maybe the aliens are having their way with us,” Gordon says, “getting all kinky with us in their spaceships. But does that mean our government is in on the plan with them? How the hell would you even find out about something like that? Ronald Reagan sure as hell won’t be telling us.”

“Maybe he was about to,” Lloyd suggests with an air of mystery. “Or perhaps someone was afraid that with his incipient senility, he’d let it slip. I’ve heard a rumor that after a private White House screening of the movie, *E.T.*, Reagan supposedly approached Steven Spielberg and said in that quiet cowboy voice of his: ‘You know, there aren’t six people in this room who know just how true that really is....’” Lloyd pauses for dramatic effect, then says: “*That* sort of loose talk could have been what John Hinckley Jr.’s failed assassination attempt was all about. I think you’ll find that Reagan has been letting Vice President Bush make most of the executive decisions ever since.”

“So does that mean Bush is a skill for the aliens?” Gordon asks.

“Only a remote viewer—or an actual alien—could answer that for certain.”

“I know Nixon must’ve been working for those bastards,” grumbles Skip.

“Nixon worked for Bush’s father, Prescott Bush, in the 1940’s,” Lloyd tells them. “At the same time, he also had a close, shady relationship with Allen Dulles, who would later become a director of the CIA. Those two men, among others, were grooming Nixon for a position of power. He was their stooge, pure and simple.

“I’ll tell you something else,” Lloyds says. “When Jimmy Carter was elected President in a backlash against the Republican Party’s shenanigans, he inherited George Bush as Director of Central Intelligence. During Bush’s first briefing with the new President-elect, Carter asked for the CIA’s most up-to-date information on UFOs and extraterrestrial intelligence. During his election campaign, Carter had told reporters that he’d actually *seen* a UFO, and he swore that if he won the election, he’d make every bit of information that our country

has about UFO sightings available to the public. But do you know what Bush told him? He said the information existed ‘on a need to know basis’ and ‘simple curiosity on the part of the President wasn’t adequate.’ We’re talking about a highly educated man with a nuclear physics degree. A man who’d just been elected President of the most powerful nation on Earth. And yet Bush snubbed him. Carter fired Bush shortly thereafter and replaced him with Stansfield Turner, who cleaned house, eliminating 800 CIA field positions in what became known as the ‘Halloween Massacre.’”

“Jesus... how’d you find out about all this stuff?” Gordon asks Lloyd. “I mean, assuming you’re not just making it up.”

“Yeah, have the aliens been stuffing a greasy electro-genital stimulator up your big ol’ fat butt, too?” Jimmy asks. He laughs and then ducks as Lloyd takes a hand off the steering wheel to reach into the backseat and swat at him. Gordon steadies the wheel as the Bentley starts to swerve.

“Come here, you damnable little squirt!” Lloyd swipes his sausage-like fingers at Jimmy’s nose, but intentionally misses. He’s not really mad—it’s all in fun. When he returns his attention to the road, Lloyd glances to his right and decides to pull off into a parking lot alongside a weather-beaten red general store. Two grimy blue Chevron gas pumps are out in front and seven wooden block letters with peeling white paint are nailed to the roofline of the store, spelling out the word: *Cholame*.

As the car slows, Jimmy hops out over the door and goes running toward a large, leafy tree surrounded by a stainless steel sculpture—even though he knows he’s not in trouble. Lloyd follows him in the Bentley and parks beneath the tree’s spreading shade.

The sculpture is a monument to James Dean. Seeing it sends an icy twinkling of sparks up Gordon’s spine as he recalls being chased by James Dean in his dream. “What are we stopping here for?” he asks.

“I thought we might buy some sodas and get out to stretch our legs,” Lloyd says. “Do you have a better plan?”

“No. I was just wondering what was up with this monument to James Dean.”

“He died here,” D.H. says. “Didn’t you know that?”

"I guess not," says Gordon. "Is this tree where he wrecked his Porsche?"

"That happened back up the road, at the highway junction we just passed," Lloyd informs him. "On October 11th, 1955—as you can read there on the memorial—a young man with the oddly appropriate name of Donald Turnupseed was making a turn in his black-and-white Ford Tudor from Highway 46 onto Highway 41, heading home toward Fresno. Without even looking, he pulled right in front of James Dean's speeding Porsche Spyder and they crashed almost head-on. Dean was killed on impact, but Turnupseed survived with barely a scratch. And thus another bright flame was offered up for the Lam to energetically consume. It's all passed into American legend now, another gaudy tale of impassioned youth designed to lead people astray."

"Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse," D.H. quotes.

"Exactly. A more useful slogan might be: 'Pay attention, grow old, and try to acquire some wisdom, or *Gnosis*, before you leave—or you'll just keep coming back.' But, of course, that's just not the American Way."

They all get out of the Bentley and stand around the circular concrete bench that surrounds the memorial. Gordon sees a bronze plaque set into the concrete with a quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*:

"What is essential is invisible to the eye."

It strikes Gordon as a particularly loaded phrase, given all he's been told recently.

He wonders if Saint-Exupéry knew about interdimensional entities and the Implicate Order. He gets a little melancholy as he thinks to himself: *Didn't he die in a plane crash, like my dad? Or did he just walk off into the desert and get bitten by a snake, like the Little Prince?*

"You were asking earlier how I knew so much about deep politics and our alien ancestors," Lloyd says, sensing Gordon's sadness and trying to distract him from it. "I've been peripherally involved with SRI's remote viewing project almost since its inception. *That's* how I know," he says.

“So how’s that work? If you’re a remote viewer, do you automatically get all the dirt on aliens, the CIA, and Vice President Bush?” Gordon asks half-facetiously.

“If you’re a remote viewer, it’s likely you’ve already *had* an alien encounter or two. All of the best remote viewers have reported UFO sightings, near-death experiences, or episodes of severe trauma in their lives—sometimes all three. Take Uri Geller, for instance. When he was four years old, an inexplicable urge led him to a deserted Arabic garden in Tel Aviv. Looking up, he saw a shining disc in the sky. A beam of light from the disc touched him and he found himself standing next to a tall, thin figure inside a luminous tunnel. Then he lost consciousness. There was an episode of missing time—”

“—And when he woke up, he was able to bend spoons, right?” D.H. doesn’t sound like he’s convinced.

“It sounds better coming from him,” Lloyd admits. “But there’s also the example of Joe McMoneagle, Remote Viewer 001 in the Army’s Project GRILL FLAME, who experienced radiation burns after seeing a UFO one night above the island of Eleuthera. He also had a near-death experience four years later, in 1970, after someone deliberately poisoned him in a German restaurant. And there’s Ingo Swann, who’s had multiple alien encounters. Ingo even had a conversation with an alien in the middle of the produce section at a Los Angeles supermarket.”

“What about Pat Price?” Gordon asks.

“Pat Price was the only accomplished remote viewer I knew who didn’t have a personal story to tell about aliens,” Lloyd says. “I never trusted him because of that. He was also the only remote viewer who could psychically read words and numbers, which I always found suspicious. And I should have mentioned this earlier, but on the day after Patty Hearst was kidnapped, the Berkeley Police Department was so desperate for leads that they phoned up SRI to ask for some psychic guidance. Pat Price volunteered his help, so he and Hal Puthoff got in a car and drove down to the Berkeley police station together. Price hadn’t thumbed through more than ten pages of mug shots before he put his finger down on one of them and said, ‘Here’s the leader!’ It was a picture of Donald DeFreeze, of course. It took the detectives almost a week before they could verify that Price had been right, but any CIA

insider worth his salt would have known that DeFreeze had been tapped for months by the MKSEARCH program to organize and lead the Symbionese Liberation Army to its preordained destruction.”

Lloyd pauses to clear his throat, briefly puffing out his fatty neck like a soulmate-seeking bullfrog in mid-croak: “So now I suspect that Pat Price was a mole for the CIA, being fed information so he could spy on the other remote viewers. That five-page report that got him the job at SRI was just a little *too* good. Unfortunately, I’ll never know if my hunch is right, because Pat Price died in Las Vegas under mysterious circumstances in 1975. No autopsy was performed. Some think he either faked his own death and continued his work for the CIA, or he was murdered by the KGB.”

“Why would the CIA send in a mole to spy on a program they were already paying for?” D.H. asks. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“The CIA has secrets even within its own ranks,” Lloyd says, “and for those who have secrets, remote viewers are their worst enemies. There’s no doubt now that remote viewing works—not with 100% reliability, but with far greater accuracy than standard CIA guesswork. People who think otherwise just haven’t done their homework. The CIA must have been terrified that the SRI program would start operating beyond their control, getting too close to secrets of the medico-military-occult complex that they would prefer to keep hidden. So a mole like Pat Price would be one way of keeping tabs on whether the really genuine psychic spies like Ingo Swann were about to crash their party.

“Let me give you an example of just how accurate remote viewers can be. It might interest you to know that Ingo Swann has proven he can remote-view other planets. In April of 1973 he participated in an experiment called the ‘Jupiter Probe’, in which he remote-viewed Jupiter four months before *Pioneer 10* made the first flyby of that planet. The raw data from Ingo’s session was sent ahead of time to the CIA, to astrophysicists at JPL, and to over a dozen other prominent researchers. One of those reports even ended up in the hands of a journalist and was widely published. When *Pioneer 10*’s collected data was sent back to JPL, the confirmation of Ingo’s observations was impressive. But what was truly mind-boggling was that Ingo claimed to

have seen a band of crystals, like the rings of Saturn, very close within Jupiter's atmosphere. The *Pioneer* probes didn't see it, and Ingo was mocked, but in 1979 as *Voyager 1* passed close to Jupiter it reported back exactly that. The Jovian Ring was one of the larger surprises in astronomical history, and Ingo had seen it six years earlier."

"Lucky guess," says Jimmy.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Lloyd says. "Remote viewing works—at least for Ingo Swann and those he's taught. Let me tell you another story... one in which I was more intimately involved. Sometime back around 1975, Ingo got a call at home from his close friend, the U.S. congressman, Charlie Rose. Charlie asked Ingo to do him a favor. He had a friend who was in need of a remote viewer's services. This friend could be trusted and Ingo would be paid a great deal of money, Charlie assured him. But for security purposes the friend would be using a pseudonym—*Mr. Axelrod*—and he requested that no information about the assignment be divulged for at least ten years."

"Then how do *you* know about it? It's only been eight," says D.H., who's good at math.

"I have my sources," Lloyd harrumphs. "So as I was saying... Ingo accepted the assignment and followed Charlie's instructions to stand on a Manhattan street corner in front of a certain museum. Two men in a black limousine picked him up and blindfolded him, then drove him several hours out of town. When the blindfold was removed, Ingo found himself in a secret underground compound. Everyone there was in civilian clothes, so he couldn't be sure if it was a government or military installation. Ingo was swiftly introduced to Mr. Axelrod, who then led him into a windowless room and provided him with a list of coordinates. They were lunar coordinates. Near the top of Mr. Axelrod's list was latitude 37.3°North and longitude 171.2°West—the coordinates for Parsons Crater, named after our old friend, Jack Whiteside Parsons. Ingo was being asked to remote-view the dark side of the Moon."

"Hey, I just thought of something!" D.H. interrupts. "Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* came out the same year that Ingo Swann started remote viewing for the CIA—in 1973. Trippy, huh?"

"Trippy indeed..." says Lloyd, humoring him.

“So what did Ingo see up there on the Moon?” Twinker asks Lloyd.

“That’s where it gets somewhat strange...” Lloyd says, as if remembering it all over again. “He saw towers and bridges and large platforms and domes. He saw tractor-like machines going up and down hills, and saucer-like vehicles stored next to craters, or sometimes alongside long, smooth roads in what looked to be airfield hangars. There were also many obelisks and pyramids that seemed to serve no apparent purpose. Much of what Ingo saw was lit by high banks of bright lights mounted on poles—like the lights you might see in a football stadium. There was a lime-green mist or fog everywhere—some sort of atmosphere. And perhaps most surprising of all, a crew of naked men (human or otherwise, he couldn’t tell...) were busy at work, digging into hillsides and zipping around with heavy machinery.”

“*Awesome!*” Jimmy roars. He couldn’t be more thrilled.

“*Nude Dudes on the Moon! Whoo-hoo!*” Skip chimes in.

“Ingo said he couldn’t quite comprehend all that he was seeing,” Lloyd continues, “but one thing was certain: whoever was in charge up there was hostile toward us. He said to Mr. Axelrod, ‘They’ve somehow got you by the balls, haven’t they? That’s why you’re resorting to psychic perceptions... they are *not* friendly, are they?’” Before the session was over, the entities somehow sensed Ingo’s presence and they warned him in no uncertain terms to stay off the Moon.”

“Just like they warned Buzz Aldrin!” D.H. says, making the connection.

“Hey, I meant to ask you about that...” Gordon says to Lloyd. “How come Buzz Aldrin told you we were warned off the Moon when he’s never said anything like that to the press? Whenever someone brings up UFOs, he and Neil Armstrong just seem to get pissed.”

“Would it surprise you to know that Buzz Aldrin is a 33rd degree Mason?” Lloyd says, giving Gordon’s arm a sly thump. “He even received the Knight Templar Cross of Honor in 1969. So, of course, Buzz is going to feel safe sharing certain intimacies with me that he would never dare share with the general public, for obvious reasons. Did you know, for instance, that Buzz was carrying a Masonic flag with him on *Apollo 11*’s flight? That flag was used to claim Masonic

Territorial Jurisdiction on the Moon for the Tranquility Lodge in Waco, Texas. It now hangs in the Library Museum of the Scottish Rite Temple located in our nation's capital, within walking distance of that enormous obelisk—or Osirian phallus—known as the Washington Monument.”

“You Masons are so fucking weird...” Gordon says. “That flag business almost sounds like a frat boy prank.”

“We take such things very seriously,” Lloyd says. “Maybe too seriously, I’ll grant you that.... But according to our beliefs, the Moon now belongs to The Great Architect of the Universe and the Texas Masons. And Texas, it so happens, is the only state in our nation that legally allows its residents to cast absentee ballots from space. So presumably, those unfriendly ‘Nude Dudes on the Moon’ could be skewing election results.”

“Weird. And what about that Mr. Axelrod guy? Was he a Mason, too?”

“He was me. *I’m* Mr. Axelrod—or at least that’s how Ingo Swann knows me.” Lloyd can’t help but grin. “And now I suggest we all go get some refreshing Coca-Colas.”



Entering the Cholame General Store, Gordon, Lloyd, and the others duck under a neon-lit Coors sign hanging from the splinter-furred rafters of the exposed ceiling, then they tread the creaky wooden floorboards past racks of marshmallows, Cheetos, Twinkies, prophylactics, and pop-top tins of Spam and Vienna Sausages.

Lloyd hasn’t stopped talking: “When NASA shut everything down in 1972, three launch-ready Saturn V rockets for further manned Moon missions had already been built at enormous taxpayer expense. Their total cost had been well over half a *billion* dollars. A consortium of private investors approached my company, wondering if they could buy those rockets on the cheap. They wanted to mine the Moon with their own clandestine space program. Specifically, they wanted to go after an isotope called Helium-3, which is very rare on Earth, but abundant on the Moon because it’s deposited there by the solar winds.

Helium-3 fusion energy is an ideal fuel source: extremely potent, non-polluting, and—unlike deuterium and tritium—it produces virtually no radioactive by-products.”

“I hate those radioactive by-products...” Gordon says, contemplating a can of Cheez-Wiz as he tries to follow Lloyd’s monologue. Everyone else has given up. They’re more interested in the search for ideal snack foods.

“There must be close to a million tons of Helium-3 on the Moon,” Lloyd says, licking his dry lips, “enough to power the world for thousands of years. It would be worth about a billion dollars a ton in terms of its energy equivalent in oil. A single space shuttle load could theoretically supply all of America’s energy needs for an entire year.”

“Sounds great. So why don’t you guys go get some?”

Lloyd picks up a large bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos and eyes its expiration date. “Well, it was a risk-fraught venture, obviously.... If my company was going to become involved in it, we wanted to know why NASA had shut down the Moon program. That, of course, led to my association with Ingo Swann—and you know the rest of the story.”

“So do you think that’s what those naked guys were doing up there—mining for Helium-3?”

“That would be my best guess,” says Lloyd. “They could have fusion reactors inside the Moon’s hollow core, keeping everything warm and humming. Did you know we still don’t have a reasonable explanation for the Moon’s origins? Many of the rock samples we took from the Moon are one- to two-billion years older than any materials found on Earth—which makes it highly unlikely that the Earth and the Moon were created at the same time. But the Moon is too big to have been captured in passing by the Earth’s relatively weak gravitational pull. It might nab anything up to 30 miles in diameter, but the Moon is over 2000 miles in diameter. It’s also highly odd that the gravitational forces are asymmetric, which keeps one side of the Moon always hidden from us and results in a net transfer of energy from the Earth to the Moon.”

“Food for the Moon!” Gordon says, flying the orange-yellow Cheez-Wiz can like a rocket past Lloyd’s pock-mark-cratered nose.

“I think you can see where I’m going with this...” Lloyd says, lowering his voice to a hushed, confidential tone. “I believe the Moon

is an artificially-constructed satellite, deliberately placed into orbit around our Earth sometime before the dawn of Mankind. Upon the Moon—or perhaps inside it, similar to the Death Star in that *Star Wars* movie everyone seems to be so fond of—there exists an almost unthinkably powerful quantum holographic projection device that keeps Earthlings trapped in a false frequency-reality construct fueled by our own negative emotions.”

“Lloyd, could you do me a favor?” Gordon practically begs as he sets down the Cheez-Wiz can on the shelf’s dust-ringed surface. “Can you please be a pal and buy me a six-pack of beer?”



Back out on the open road, Lloyd gets the Bentley up to speed and then resumes his monologue right where he left off: “Strange activity on the Moon has been reported for hundreds of years.... There’s a fascinating document you should all take a look at—NASA Technical Report R-277. It’s a chronological catalog listing 579 unusual lunar sightings, generally considered reliable, from as far back as the year 1540. On March 5th, 1587, for example, a star was seen emanating from within the body of the crescent moon, ‘directly between the points of her horns’—just like the star and crescent moon symbol on the flags of so many Muslim countries. Could that ‘star’ have signified a lunar base? And do the flags of those predominantly Islamic nations signify their allegiance with the denizens of that Moon base? It’s food for thought.”

“It’s food for the Moon...” Gordon mopes. “I could’ve really used that beer.”

“We’re traveling in an open vehicle,” Lloyd points out. “I can’t have some unenlightened Highway Patrolman accusing me of contributing to the delinquency of minors.”

“Even though that’s what you do, with all your whacked-out talk,” Twinker says with a pout.

“Lloyd’s just tellin’ it like it is!” Jimmy says, jumping to his uncle’s defense.

“Yeah!” Skip shouts, backing him up with a militantly raised fist. “Nude Dudes on the Moon. *It’s the Truth!*”

“Get real,” Twinker says.

Lloyd reaches into a brown paper grocery bag tucked under his seat and tosses the new June 1983 issue of *Penthouse* into Gordon’s lap. “Good pornography stimulates your kundalini and raises your endorphin levels, creating an analgesic effect. It can lead to addiction like anything else, but it’s better for you than beer.... Besides, you need to be sober for your meeting with Doctor Felix.”

“Doctor Felix...” Gordon mutters, thoroughly disgruntled. “What makes *him* so fucking special, anyway?” He starts thumbing through the magazine.

“Our friend Doctor Felix was the founding director of the National Institute of Mental Health from 1949 to 1964. He was involved in some ethically sketchy dealings with MKULTRA and its predecessors, but he’s since repented of all that. He’s also a 33rd degree Mason—no surprise there, I suppose.... He’s now a director of the Scottish Rite’s psychiatric research team. If anyone knows about mind control, it’s him.”

“Great...” Gordon says, and then with more enthusiasm: “Hey, look!” pointing to the magazine, “*Penthouse* has an interview with your buddy, L. Ron Hubbard.”

“Notice the *Junior* appellation,” Lloyd observes. “That’s L. Ron Hubbard’s son.”

“Still, it should be interesting....”

“I can’t believe you, man!” Skip says in disgust. “You’re actually reading the goddam articles?”

Gordon is too busy scanning the article to reply. “I don’t think L. Ron Hubbard Jr. likes his dad very much,” he says after a few minutes. “He claims he was born premature because his dad botched an abortion attempt on his mother. And listen to this—he’s talking about how he grew up watching his father screw people over with Scientology: ‘...*What a lot of people don’t realize,*’ he says, *‘is that Scientology is black magic that’s just spread out over a long period of time. To perform black magic generally takes a few hours or, at most, a few weeks. But in Scientology it’s stretched out over a lifetime, and so you don’t see it. Black magic is the inner core of*

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

Scientology—and it's probably the only part of Scientology that really works. Also, you've got to realize that my father didn't worship Satan. He thought he was Satan.... The Antichrist. Aleister Crowley thought of himself as such. And when Crowley died in 1947, my father then decided that he should wear the cloak of the beast and become the most powerful being in the universe."

"I guess that stuff he did with Jack Parsons was just a warm-up," D.H. says.

"Jack Parsons was so much cooler," Jimmy comments.

"There's more," says Gordon, reading: *"...Hitler was involved in the same black magic and the same occult practices that my father was. The identical ones. Which, as I've said, stem clear back to before Egyptian times. It's a very secret thing. Very powerful and very workable and very dangerous. Brainwashing is nothing compared to it. The proper term would be "soul cracking." It's like cracking open the soul, which then opens various doors to the power that exists, the satanic and demonic powers. Simply put, it's like a tunnel or an avenue or a doorway. Pulling that power into yourself through another person—and using women, especially—is incredibly insidious. It makes Doctor Fu Manchu look like a kindergarten student. It is the ultimate vampirism, the ultimate mind-fuck. Instead of going for blood, you're going for their soul. And you take drugs in order to reach that state where you can, quite literally, like a psychic hammer, break their soul, and pull the power through. He designed his Scientology Operating Thetan techniques to do the same thing. But, of course, it takes a couple of hundred hours of auditing and megathousands of dollars for the privilege of having your head turned into a glass Humpty Dumpty—shattered into a million pieces. It may sound like incredible gibberish, but it made my father a fortune."*

"*Soul cracking.* Now there's a term you don't hear every day..." says Lloyd. "But I think he's got it exactly right. And it's not just going on in the cults, like Scientology. It's happening within all the major world religions. Catholic priests are sodomizing little boys—"

"No way!" says Skip.

"—Islamic clerics are condemning headstrong women to be stoned to death at public executions—"

"Those bastards!" says Twinker.

"—and have you noticed how every monotheistic religion ends up persecuting and murdering other people who don't accept that religion's version of the One and Only God? As Arthur C. Clarke put

it: 'Isn't killing people in the name of God a pretty good definition of insanity?'"

"That's why I'm an atheist," D.H. proclaims.

Lloyd isn't quite finished: "For every war—for every woman raped and every man maimed or slaughtered, for all the savagery and destruction—there's an underlying reason..."

"...it's all food for the Moon," Gordon finishes for him, half-hoping he's wrong.

"Exactly. It feeds the Lam and the original gods of Mesopotamia—" Lloyd leans over and conspiratorially whispers into Gordon's ear—"the *Anunnaki*."

"Oh boy..." says Gordon.

"*You've got to feed the alien...*" Jimmy sings tunelessly. He hears the opening chords of Led Zeppelin's "Houses of the Holy" on the stereo and he shouts, "Hey, Lloyd, turn it up!"

D.H. leans forward and taps Lloyd on the shoulder, shouting above the wind's turbulence: "Hey Lloyd, does it freak you the fuck out to know that Jimmy Page, the lead guitarist for this band, bought Aleister Crowley's old house in England?"

"Nothing 'freaks me the fuck out' since my discovery of the 'Nude Dudes on the Moon,'" Lloyd answers, still clearly in command of his emotions. "And the house you're thinking of is the Boleskine House, on the southeastern shore of Scotland's Loch Ness. Some people even blame the more recent Loch Ness Monster sightings, beginning in 1933, on an aborted magick ritual that Crowley conducted there."

"Makes sense to me," Gordon says. "I already thought it was a tulpa."

"Or a really big sturgeon," Jimmy reminds him.

"Didn't Jimmy Page make some girl have sex with a fish while they were giving a concert in Seattle?" Skip asks D.H. while he grinds his pelvis under Twinker's butt to the music's rhythm. "I wonder if he ever got abducted."

Lloyd drowns out the rest of their conversation as he turns up the stereo speakers in the backseat. He continues talking quietly to Gordon, so no one else can hear: "As I was saying... in certain cases you might do well to think of *God* as a low-orbiting entity, as near as

our Moon, that eats our emotions and starves without them—*God*, in those cases, being synonymous with the Anunnaki. So all those fervid exhortations to pray, to go to war, to serve *God* and country, to bear the noble burden of suffering—they're only ploys used by spiritually-corrupt men and women to get you to feed that *God* of theirs. If they're successful, they might be rewarded. But that only makes them higher caste slaves in an enslaved society. True spirituality, or *Gnosis*, is the only safe passage through this world. Institutional religion will eat you alive. When someone surrenders themselves, body and soul, to church dogma—or worse, to a televangelist—their soul is consumed, bit by bit. But by *starving God*—by reigning in our negative emotions, our moronic passions and infantile greed—well... in that way lies salvation."

"So Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart... all those guys are working for the Anunnaki?"

"You better believe it," says Lloyd. "They're Four Gibbering Horsemen of a Trumped-up Apocalypse—experts at soul cracking, each and every one."

"No wonder the Christian Broadcasting Network always gave me the creeps."

"Understand, I'm not saying a perfect, loving God doesn't exist," Lloyd cautions. "I'm only saying that the *God* of Jerry Falwell and his brethren is not the True God they'd have you think. It's tyranny masquerading as belief—an ideological virus that infects human psyches and turns people into spiritual zombies."

"Tricky..." says Gordon. "I'll bet the Republicans are in on it, too."

"Along with high-ranking Democrats, Presidents, dictators, CEOs, United Nations diplomats, and Supreme Court Justices," says Lloyd, barely pausing to catch his breath. "For more than seven thousand years, the Dark Brotherhood—to use your grandmother's phrase—has been forging a vast network of politically powerful secret societies and religions capable of organizing people into competing factions. They maintain top-down control from the highest echelons of those organizations... even within the Freemasons, I'm sad to say... and they use their positions to secretly instigate wars between human beings. And as you already know, they were *also* the unseen planners

behind most of the famous assassinations of the past few decades—which quite spectacularly furthered the emotional turmoil upon which their masters feed.”

“How did those assassinations work again?” Gordon asks. If Lloyd told him during their previous conversation, his memory of it must be occluded. *Blame it on the absinthe....*

“It’s all mind control and sleight of hand,” Lloyd says. “A simple chess analogy can be used to illustrate: pawn checks king, but checkmate comes from the overlooked knight.”

“Oh... *right...*” says Gordon, hoping Lloyd will continue to illuminate.

“It all dates back to the original techniques developed by Hasan bin Sabbah with his Assassins in the fortress at Alamut. Modern assassinations are just variations on the same theme, grown increasingly sophisticated over time. Instead of getting potential recruits stoned on hashish, now memory-loss and hallucinations are produced using synthetic drugs like scopolamine, dipropyltryptamine, and LSD. You can thank Josef Mengele and the CIA for that infernal medical leap. They’ve also perfected the art of instilling men with the suicidal desire to commit acts of terrorism—which used to be accomplished with no more than a blissful, faked-up version of Mohammed’s Paradise. Now it’s all done with post-hypnotic suggestion and triggering mechanisms.”

“At least a guy could get laid a few times while he was in Paradise,” says Gordon, still ruining his own virginity. “With hypnosis, all you do is quack like a duck.”

“The old assassins had it better...” Lloyd agrees. “Hasan’s methods allowed his *fidais* to take a perverse pride in their accomplishments. In our modern day and age, the hypnotized and chemically-compromised assassin is most often used as a decoy—or a *patsy*, as Lee Harvey Oswald described himself. The *real* assassins hide in the shadows, or sometimes even in plain sight. Rogue CIA operatives, Secret Service agents, and hired bodyguards do the real killing, while the mind-controlled patsy takes the fall.”

“I always knew Oswald and Sirhan weren’t just making that shit up.”

“No, but they weren’t wholly unwitting victims, either...” Lloyd says. “Both men had the *intent* to kill before they were picked up and prepared for their roles. They also had the Anunnaki-bred neural DNA that would allow them to be controlled. The hypnosis and memory-obliterating chemical cocktails were just a means of softening them up. When the time came for the deed to be done, they quite literally knew not what they did, but their murderous intent had been there all along.”

It starts with an evil intent... Gordon recalls, thinking back to the insight he had walking home from his grandmother’s house with his little brother on Halloween. *And from there everything snowballs straight to hell....*

“So who *really* killed JFK?” Gordon asks. He doesn’t think anyone can give him the definitive answer to that question, but he’s hoping Lloyd will at least give it a shot.

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” Lloyd asks him. “The Anunnaki did it, with human assistance from your grandmother’s Dark Brotherhood. So much of the evidence was compromised, so many witnesses and potential whistle-blowers were murdered after the fact... a conspiracy was obvious. If it’s specific names you’re after, there are almost too many to keep track of. You might begin with the cabal of CIA men who were known to run their own rogue operations in those days: names like Allen Dulles, James Jesus Angleton, Ted Shackley, Frank Sturgis, and E. Howard Hunt.... I’m not saying any one of them fired the fatal shot that splattered their Commander-in-Chief’s brains across the trunk of his limousine. *That* could’ve come from a silenced weapon up the sleeve of the limousine’s driver, Special Agent William Greer, who hit the brakes and turned to look at JFK just before the side of his head was blown off. Or, more likely, the shot was fired from behind the white picket fence on the infamous grassy knoll.... But every one of those men I’ve named was surely involved in the conspiracy’s cover-up—in spirit, if not in deed.”

“Some of those guys were involved in the Watergate break-in, too, weren’t they?”

“Sturgis and Hunt,” Lloyd confirms. “That’s the apocalyptic price America has paid for failing to bring JFK’s killers to justice. Those rogue elements in the CIA and the sinister forces backing them have

become even bolder. In the years since, their crimes have compounded. You know the story... they got away with killing Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Around the same time, Richard Nixon was secretly using Anna Chennault as a go-between with South Vietnamese President Thieu to cut a deal that would sink the Johnson administration's Vietnam peace initiative, resulting in Nixon's election to the presidency and seven more years of war. Then, of course, there was Watergate; and more recently, the machinations of George Bush and the hundreds of disgruntled CIA agents who rallied around him as their champion during the Iranian hostage crisis, resulting in the October Surprise and Reagan's rigged victory over Carter at the polls. *Such arrogance...* and yet we continue to turn a blind eye. America just keeps shrugging off the burden of self-knowledge. Truly, I believe the assassination of John F. Kennedy will be looked at from an historical perspective as the beginning of the end of our democracy."

"You could argue that it happened even earlier," Gordon says, "like when we started collaborating with the Nazi's during Operation PAPERCLIP and looked the other way while the Vatican's 'rat lines' helped Nazi war criminals escape to places like South America. Or maybe we were screwed right from the start, back when George Washington crossed the Manson-Nixon Line and signed up with those evil goddam Freemasons."

"You've been doing some independent research, I see..." Lloyd says with a lopsided grin. "Are you familiar with the concept of egregores?"

"No. What's an egregore?"

"When two minds come together to achieve a common goal, a third and superior mind is created—an egregore."

"What're you saying about greed and gore?" Jimmy interrupts from the backseat, where "Houses of the Holy" is just ending with a flurry of wailing from Robert Plant.

Lloyd turns off the stereo. "*Egregore...*" he enunciates. "It's an Old English term that roughly means 'the spirit of a thing.' As I was telling Gordon, an egregore is a kind of group-mind that's created whenever two or more people come together for a specific, shared purpose. For instance, let's say you and Gordon put your minds together to create an article for the school newspaper, as I know you've done in the past.

And let's say the purpose of that article is to tear down the reputation of a certain hypocritical high school administrator who shall remain nameless."

"Witzkowski!" Jimmy shouts with uninhibited glee.

"That raging dickhead," Skip further clarifies, still semi-discreetly humping away at Twinker.

"Now... so long as you both remain true to your original purpose—to destroy someone's reputation—your minds will be 'entangled' on a quantum level," Lloyd tells them. "You'll experience some commingling of your morphic fields, which might result in mind-to-mind communication—a nonlocal transference of information that explains things like how you sometimes know who's calling before you pick up a ringing phone. That quantum entanglement also creates a third mind, or egregore, that can know much more than either one of you on your own. In the beginning, an egregore is no more than a kind of crude quantum computer program that helps you to achieve your goal. Such help can arrive in many forms. From within, it might turn up as inspired thoughts. From without, it might appear as useful synchronicities: Jimmy might happen to be in the right place at the right time with a camera on a day when his quarry is looking somewhat... *fishy*."

"*Like a sanctimonious fishman*," says Gordon, to get the phrase exactly right. "I'm pretty sure Witz never forgave us for that."

"Yes, well, remember what I said: the egregore is like a rudimentary computer program in its early stages. Although it's meant to serve, if it's not given the proper commands it can easily turn on its creators, like a golem. In your case, that would mean the reputation you end up destroying could be your own."

Gordon remembers the joke that came back to haunt him—his father's fury over what he'd written in the *Columbia Journalism Review*: "*Norman Mailer could be reading right this minute that my jackass son thinks he was raised by wolves!*" The same queasy-sick sensation that he felt then rises from the soles of his sweaty feet to shudder through him all over again. "Oh crud..." he mutters.

"Fortunately, most egregores dissipate rather quickly once their objective has been achieved," Lloyd says, as if to soothe him. "But when the process continues over a long period of time and more

minds are persuaded to add their psychic energy to its agenda, an egregore can grow strong enough and smart enough to survive even the death of its original creators. At that point, the egregore truly has a life of its own. And that's when things get interesting..." Lloyd takes his hands off the steering wheel long enough to rub his palms together in a pantomime of an evil genius anticipating the fruition of his havoc-wreaking schemes.

"Interesting how?" asks D.H., leaning forward from the backseat.

Lloyd says, "Consider the egregore of the Templars, energized by the fanatical devotion and bloodshed of thousands of men for nearly 200 years. In 1314, after Pope Clement nullified the Templar Order with a helping hand from King Philip the Fair, the egregore of the Templars lived on. By then, it had become conscious. It knew how to think—how to get what it wanted. It murdered those who had conspired against it and then it withdrew to the inner dimensions. There, with infinite patience, it waited for centuries until it was contacted by a new order of men prepared to carry out the intentions of its original founders and supply the egregore with the psychic energy it requires to function in our world. What those men gained in return was access to the Templar egregore's vast accumulation of knowledge and power. The name of that new order was... can anyone guess?"

"Devo?" D.H. suggests.

"The Freemasons," Gordon says.

"Good man!" Lloyd congratulates him. "You're starting to see how it all works. Corporations, political parties, religions, and even nations all have their own egregores. And all those egregores are warring for influence over us. Obviously, we can't help but become affiliated with at least a few egregores over the course of our lifetimes. But if we do so without thinking, there's bound to be trouble."

"So an egregore is like Jung's ideas about the collective unconscious," says Gordon, trying to understand, "only narrowed down to just Republicans, or just the Catholic Church."

"Essentially, yes," Lloyd agrees, "but with the caveat that the egregores of the Republican Party and the Catholic Church are far more virulent than the all-embracing collective unconscious. Which brings me to my next point. Some egregores are created in fits of

malice or xenophobic hatred, and those egregores exist only to destroy, giving rise to instincts for death and domination in their individual members. The Nazi egregore would be a prime example, of course.”

“The Michael Jackson egregore would be another one,” D.H. says, thinking of the singer-songwriter that he currently despises most.

“Such an egregore has a vicious, malign strength,” Lloyd continues, choosing to ignore D.H., “and it can infect other egregores like a virus. By imposing its form on its enemies, it thereby becomes its enemies. I believe something like that occurred when the CIA made the grotesque moral error of bringing Nazi war criminals to our shores during Operation PAPERCLIP. The Nazi egregore infected the CIA egregore and eventually overpowered it. The Nazis even had a word for such invisible battles among egregores: *Weltanschauungskrieg*. It translates as ‘world-view warfare.’ They may have been the first to name it, but this type of warfare has been going on for centuries. More than a thousand years ago, I believe a similar battle was fought and lost by the egregore of the Roman Catholic Church.”

“The same thing happened to me with ‘Beat It,’” says D.H.; “I couldn’t get that stupid song out of my head for months.”

“If that’s how it works, then what about the Assassins?” Gordon asks Lloyd. “Did the Assassin egregore infect the Templar egregore and then get passed along to the Masons?”

“I’m afraid that it did,” Lloyd says.

That isn’t the answer Gordon was expecting to hear.

“The Freemasons have certainly been known to commit assassinations from time to time,” Lloyd admits. “Just look into the Propaganda Due Lodge in Italy, if you don’t believe me.”

“Then why were we even talking about soul-sucking moon men and all that other junk?” Gordon asks, exasperated. “We should’ve been talking about egregores all along!”

“Are you sure there’s a difference?”

“An egregore doesn’t need a spaceship.”

“Point taken...” says Lloyd, “and you may well be right. Perhaps my tale of interdimensional alien mind-parasites is just a useful allegory for the workings of our self-created egregores. After all, the magical birthing and feeding of egregores was the carefully guarded secret at

the core of the ancient mystery cults—a process they called ‘The Art of Creating Gods.’ And some of mankind’s oldest myths refer to a war between those so-called gods, at which point Man became a slave to egregores that he himself had created. We’ve been obliged to serve them ever since, not only with sweat and tears, but with our blood.”

“Smells like the same old bullshit to me,” says Jimmy.

To Gordon’s more refined nose, the odor wafting off Lloyd is redolent of high-priced cologne, smothered farts, and the usual halitosis-punctuated pedantry. Jimmy’s right: nothing new.

“Let’s think for a moment about how the egregores of corporations operate, since the Reagan administration seems so determined to hand our country over to them,” Lloyd says as the wind blows his toupee into devilish snarls. “It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that corporations are immortal soulless entities that take as much as they can and give nothing in return. Their primary goal is to keep increasing productivity and earnings in an all-devouring, endless cycle. Corporate egregores exploit their workers, pollute the environment, and turn vast quantities of the world’s irreplaceable natural resources into disposable junk products, all just to show a quarterly profit. They steal from the poor and give to the rich, creating enormous concentrations of wealth in the hands of just a few thousand elitist assholes. If Reagan and Bush get their way and all that money and power isn’t redistributed—via a system of fair taxes and the checks and balances built into our Constitution—then America’s liberal, democratic society will soon be looking a lot more like a corporate-sponsored fascist police state. And that will be because, quite simply, the egregores of unchecked capitalism tend to penalize those who would better the lot of humanity, while at the same time rewarding the relatively few unbridled sociopaths who take advantage of anyone and anything that they can.”

“Yeah, but where would we be without porn and Diet Coke?” Jimmy asks, pointing to just two of their recent purchases.

“Well, if you can’t beat ‘em...” Lloyd says cheerfully. “Seriously, why do you think I ended up in the insurance racket, anyway? My line of work probably has some of the most evil egregores out there—aside from Big Oil and the tobacco companies—yet most insurance brokers

see that evil as something apart from themselves. They fail to recognize it as coming from their own hearts and souls.”

“But not you,” says Gordon.

“No... not me,” says Lloyd. “Not now, at least. That’s why I’m here doing my penance, trying to provide a little enlightened adult guidance to a carload of snarky but redeemable teenage jerk-offs.”

“Hey, I resent that,” D.H. says. “I haven’t jerked-off in this car even once. Only Skip has....”

“Actually, I just had a healthy orgasm in my pants,” jokes Skip, who’s finally decided to stop dry-humping Twinker and join the conversation. “Y’know, this whole egreore thing kind of sounds like orgone monsters, if you ask me”

“Oh, Skip, don’t even go there,” Twinker says.

“Yeah, we’re *way* past orgone monsters now,” D.H. puts in.

“No, really...” says Skip. “I mean, I may not be as smart as you guys, but I’m pretty sure orgone monsters have something to do with this.”

“I can see how there might be a tenuous connection,” Lloyd admits. “I don’t know much about orgone monsters *per se*, but I *do* know that the term ‘orgone’ originated with Wilhelm Reich. He was a brilliant psychoanalyst, a colleague of Freud. Orgone was the word Reich used to describe a universal life force that gathers in clouds—”

“See! I told you!” crows Skip.

“—and in erections. He even thought it could be measured as an electrical discharge at the moment of orgasm.”

“Cool!”

“According to Reich, orgone could also be accumulated in devices of his own making called Orgone Boxes, which he employed to cure cancer and impotence—thus leading to even more, and happier, erections.”

“I’m lovin’ this guy!”

“Yeah, but the U.S. government hated him,” Gordon fills in. “In the fifties, they banned all his books and threw him in jail. Then he kind of suspiciously died of a heart attack one day before he was up for parole.”

"I thought only Nazis did shit like that!" Skip's sense of moral outrage is acting up again, just like it did when Lloyd was recounting the tribulations of Patty Hearst.

"The Nazis banned Reich's books earlier," says Lloyd, "back in 1933, when he came out with *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, a book in which he explained his theory that fascism is a result of sexual repression."

"Oh, Hitler must've *loved* that one," says Skip.

"I'll bet he had a tiny weenie," Twinker adds.

"It's really quite fascinating how Reich worked everything out," Lloyd says with genuine admiration. "Reich saw the budding Nazi movement as the latest manifestation of what he called the 'mechanistic-mystical complex,' which he felt had its origins in the breakdown of earth-oriented paganism and the subsequent rise of the anti-sexual, rigidly authoritarian ideology of the Holy Roman Empire. Ever since paganism fell out of favor, Reich said, 'the biologic core of humanity has been without social representation.' And what happens when we try to repress our bodily sensations, especially the sexual-genital feelings that paganism once held sacred? Well, again, according to Reich, that repression gives rise to a disturbing mix of mystical and militaristic fixations that have their root in the master fixation of a transcendent, unknowable God far beyond the Earth. That mix of fixations—or the mechanistic-mystical complex, as he calls it—grows like body armor around people, turning them into unfeeling automatons. And that, in turn, leads straight to patriarchal domination and to its even uglier stepson, fascism."

"So basically, what you're saying is: if we have a lot of sex, we won't turn into Nazis," Skip concludes.

"Well, I wouldn't put it exactly in those terms..." says Lloyd. "Let's just say that an active, guilt-free sex life might provide some immunity against fascist eggregores. Even masturbation would probably be of help."

"Did you hear that, Gordon?" Skip asks him. "You can fight fascism by jerking-off! Dude, you're in luck!"

"I already knew that," Gordon says. "You don't see me wearing jackboots and goose-stepping around shouting, '*Heil Hitler!*' do you?"

At the rate he's been beating his meat, the fascist egregores don't stand a chance.

"The Gnostics had some similar ideas," Lloyd says, "although I doubt Reich was aware of them. But there are interesting parallels.... For one, the Gnostics used the word 'Archon' to signify the evil servants of the Demiurge, but in ancient Greece 'Archon' was a commonly used term for 'ruler' or 'authority.' The Gnostics also believed people could be 'Archontized'—or converted to the antagonistic fanaticism of the Archons and blinded to their own Divine Spark. Some Gnostics deliberately participated in orgiastic sex rituals designed to build up resistance to the Archons' intrapsychic attempts at leading them astray. So in *that* sense, the Archons could be considered identical to fascist egregores."

"But if Archons are egregores, and egregores are created by ordinary groups of people, then is all the evil in the world just... *us*?" Gordon asks.

"I don't think so," says Lloyd, "and here's why: According to the Theosophists, the origin of the word 'egregore' predates its Old English usage. It supposedly derives from the ancient Greek word 'egregori,' which means 'watcher' or 'guardian.' In fact, *The Book of Enoch* gives the name Grigori to the fallen angels—more commonly known as the Watchers—who married the daughters of Seth and sired a race of giants with them. Which, of course, takes us right back to where we started with the Nefilim, the Lam, and the ancient gods of Mesopotamia."

"Interdimensional aliens and food for the Moon again."

"Exactly."



Okay, can I just butt in here for a minute? Lloyd is actually doing a pretty good job of describing the Dark Brotherhood, believe it or not. (Sometimes it helps, I guess, to know an organization from the inside out.) Fascist egregores and interdimensional aliens are great metaphors for Archons, so I have no problem there. And all that paranoid-sounding talk about how those otherworldly parasites feed off the negative emotions of humanity is basically right on.... But there's one thing that Lloyd hasn't gotten around to

mentioning, and I think it's important. It's the fact that the Brotherhood of Light feeds off the life force of humanity, too—but with one major difference:

The Brotherhood of Light feeds off our love.

To put it simply, if there wasn't any love in the world, the Brotherhood of Light wouldn't be here. Daimons wouldn't have any way of connecting with their charges, empathy and good fellowship and selfless service to others would be just empty concepts, and we'd all be fucked. And I don't mean fucked in a happy, orgasmic, Wilhelm Reich kind of way—which can make the Brotherhood of Light grow stronger. I mean the un-fun kind of fucked. As in fucked over.

Lloyd is right: it's a predatory universe. Suffering is fundamental to this realm and those who are attracted to it are generally indifferent to the suffering of others. While it may seem unfair that spiritual entities feed off our energy while we're incarnated in human bodies, that's just the way it is. The only real choice we have is between victimization and cooperation. What I mean by that is that every one of us has a choice to make on a daily, hourly, or even minute-by-minute basis: do we just passively allow our life force to feed the Dark Brotherhood, or do we consciously choose to feed the Brotherhood of Light?

It's not as straightforward a choice as you might think. The Dark Brotherhood can be monstrously seductive. It's easier to snuff out your own Divine Spark than to pick a fight with the darkness that surrounds you. That's why so many souls get lost when they spend time on Earth. And that's why so many of us choose to reincarnate—to help those lost souls find their way back to the Light. It's a risky mission, obviously. We could get lost, too. But it's also one of the quickest paths to spiritual advancement.

And frankly, we must not be all that spiritually-advanced if we're still incarnating on Earth, for whatever the reason. Because while we're here, we almost always end up as predators, too—just as guilty of feeding off the life force of others as any Armani-suited servant of the Dark Brotherhood, or any sphincter-probing bug-eyed alien.

Think about that the next time you're trying on a pair of nice new Italian leather shoes... or chomping into a fat ham sandwich.

FLAMING SHARK BRAIN DAYDREAM

While Lloyd's Bentley purrs along the flat asphalt ribbon of Highway 46 climbing into the forested foothills southwest of Paso Robles, Gordon smells pine needles, ocean air, and sun-baked earth and his heart starts to gladden. He's doesn't understand *why* he's so much happier until he realizes they're on the same route his father used to drive to get them to their cabin in Morro Bay. Soon they'll be arriving at the Pacific Coast Highway, where a turn to the left in Gordon's youth would have taken them past the little town of Harmony (Population: 9), and the sun-faded fishing piers jutting into the calm blue sea from the beaches of Cayucos.

At that point in the trip, Gordon would always lean forward in his seat, scanning the horizon through the windshield for the three glorious cooling tower stacks rising above the Pacific Gas and Electric plant near Morro Bay harbor, and beyond that, the magnificence that was Morro Rock. He'd always let out a joyous shout when he saw it (*"There it is!"*): Morro Rock rising like a gargantuan pile of petrified cow dung plopped on the bay's shoreline, towering above everything else, massive and monolithic, as high and wide in Gordon's eyes as the Great Pyramid of Giza.

And then they'd get to their cabin with its flat, slanting roof and its Chinese red door and the tangle of ice plants in the front yard instead of a lawn. And they'd pull into the crushed oyster shell driveway and park under the carport next to a mahogany day-fishing boat that belonged to their next-door-neighbor, Qweep. Qweep was a retired Coast Guard officer whose real name was Clete, but when Gordon had been very small he'd insisted on pronouncing it like a bird's chirp

(“*Qweep!*”), and Qweep—a kind-hearted, self-effacing old bachelor—took delight in repeating it, so the name stuck.

Inside the cabin there would be bunk beds with nubby-textured chenille bedcovers, a fifties-era kitchen with an aquamarine Bakelite radio sitting on top of a starburst-patterned Formica countertop, and in the living room, a white vinyl Danish Modern couch bookended by two tall bamboo-framed watercolor paintings depicting solemn-eyed Mayan children—a boy in one, a girl in the other—standing in leafy jungle settings that could have been painted by the Douanier Rousseau.

Best of all, there would be a closet full of toys and games that Gordon’s parents would actually sit down and *play* with him. That’s why Gordon loved the cabin so much: Once they’d passed beyond its Chinese red front door, his parents seemed to forget their everyday annoyances. Their usual masks of irritation, boredom, or outright hostility were hidden away. The cabin was the only place where they dropped all their expectations and allowed Gordon the luxury of just being a little boy.

Soon after they’d unpacked and settled in, Qweep would usually stop by to say hello and challenge Gordon to a game of Chinese checkers. Later, they’d all go fishing—usually down at the pier, but sometimes out on Qweep’s boat. On those rare occasions, Gordon’s mother would stay behind to read her Harlequin Romance novels, tucking herself away somewhere in the sand dunes at the local beach.

Once, when Gordon was around five years old, Qweep had taken them out on a deep-sea fishing expedition in semi-rough weather. A squall line was coming in from the southwest and turning the sea choppy, but Qweep claimed to have seen much worse back in his Coast Guard days and the fishing was far too good to head right back in. Mal had just landed a fat, gaping-mouthed vermilion rockfish—or *red snapper*, as he called it. The sudden decompression suffered by the fish when it was brought up from the sea’s depths had made its ping-pong-ball-sized eyes bulge out from the sides of its head, which Gordon found both creepy and fascinating. About ten minutes earlier, Qweep had pulled up a slick, mottled brown halibut as big as a garbage can lid from the deep green water. And not long before that, Mal had hooked something called a flag rockfish, which looked a lot like the red

snapper, only with red-and-white flanks striped like a barber's pole. That fish's eyes had been popping out its sockets, too.

Fish, for five-year-old Gordon, were just unbelievably weird.

The wind picked up and the rocking of Qweep's boat became more noticeable. The sea's waves grew taller and the troughs plunged deeper. From Gordon's perspective, when they were deep inside a trough, the approaching waves looked ten times taller than Qweep's little mahogany boat. Gordon felt ungainly, and hardly protected, in his orange canvas life jacket. He was afraid the wall of water would roll the boat over, or worse, break above their heads and drown them—but every time the trough lifted up and the wave smoothly went under them. Qweep didn't seem the slightest bit concerned.

Suddenly, Mal's hefty deep-sea rod bent over double, then snapped in two with a loud crack. "Holy mackerel, Mal, what've you got there?" Qweep wondered aloud. "Tighten your drag..." he added, as an afterthought. Thick monofilament line was screeching off the reel.

"I can barely hold on," said Mal as both of his big hands strained against the rod's cork grips.

"Here... lemme take over," Qweep said, scooting over close to Mal. Qweep took the broken rod and stood up with it in the center of the boat so he could turn with the line and follow it as it circled the prow. Gordon had to duck under it.

At that moment they were deep inside a sea trough with a wave at least sixteen feet high rolling toward them like a wall of green molten glass scribbled with sea kelp and cold white froth. The fishing line from Mal's rod rose up and veered straight into the watery wall, and then they could all see it—the dark torpedo shape moving slowly into the swell, resolving clearer as it moved higher on the wall, until at last it was right across from them, as obvious as any fish in an aquarium:

It was a shark at least eleven feet long.

"A goddam mako!" Qweep swore.

Qweep started reeling in line as fast as he could as the wall of water rolled closer and the shark rose higher in it. Gordon was terrified that Qweep would yank on the pole and haul the shark straight out of the wave and into the boat. It was that close to them. He could see

everything now: the blue dorsal fin, the terrible white underbelly, the ghoulish pointed snout with its crooked saw-toothed grin and bottomless black, fist-sized eye. There was no recognizable human emotion in that eye. There was only hunger.

“Let’s cut the line!” Mal shouted, panicked.

“No way! I’m bringin’ her in,” Qweep shouted back. “She’ll make good shark fin soup, and we might save the leg of some poor surfer.”

Then the wall of water rolled under them, or the boat floated over it. Either way, the fishing line and the shark disappeared beneath the hull.

A few seconds later, the line started wrapping stiffly, crazily, around the boat’s outboard propeller. Qweep couldn’t control it.

Then almost everything stood still. Fear was crawling through Gordon’s scalp like a swarm of baby crabs. The only sound he could hear was the waves with their gentle lap and plop.

Mal picked up a baseball bat from the bottom of the boat. Qweep kept it there to club fish. It was stained with rust-colored patches of blood and crusty old scales. The fat end, Gordon noticed, had been machine-stamped with the now barely legible signature of Joe DiMaggio. Qweep picked up a long aluminum gaffing pole with a nasty hook on the end. And they waited....

...and waited.

The blue dorsal fin surfaced about five yards behind the boat and swiftly moved toward them as the water around it started to roil. Then, with a furious thrashing, the shark’s entire body broke the surface with its two-foot-wide jaws agape and drawing water.

The explosion of adrenaline made Gordon’s entire body go numb. He couldn’t even breathe, or feel the pee running down his leg.

Qweep jousted at the mako’s snout with the gaffing pole, but that was worse than useless. He threw down the pole with a clang and lifted up one of the boat’s hinged seat covers. He emerged with a flare gun, which he fired straight into the shark’s still-gaping mouth. The flare’s phosphorous load hissed and sizzled as it hit the water. Its brilliant, spattering glow lit up the inside of the mako’s cavernous gullet and all those big, bitey teeth surrounding it. Then the jaws snapped shut and the phosphorous light was swallowed.

“*That*’ll give you a case of indigestion, you sorry cunt,” said Qweep.

The shark thrashed and flexed half-out of the water as it swam closer to the boat. Then, with a lunge, it bit down on the boat’s propeller. The whole boat shook and seemed to move backward.

“Bite my boat, will you?” Qweep raged. He fired another flare right between the shark’s eyes, far back along the clenching snout where its tiny brain would reside.

(*Right in the third eye chakra*, thinks Gordon, recalling the scene from the safety of Lloyd’s Bentley. *A Catholic shark’s final blessing on Ash Wednesday....*)

As the second phosphorous charge dazzlingly burned, the shark convulsed and shuddered. Slowly, in increments that almost seemed measurable, it started to die. Mal hadn’t gotten his chance to whack it with the baseball bat of Marilyn Monroe’s famous ex-husband. He looked somewhat relieved.

Eventually, the mako let go of the propeller and started to drift. The only sign it was still alive was an occasional twitch of its tail. Then, when even the tail was stilled, Qweep hauled the shark’s carcass alongside the boat and tied it to the cleats running along the gunwale with a stout nylon rope passed through its gill slits.

The shark was too big to fit in the boat. It would have to be towed.

When Qweep tried to start the boat’s engine, he found the propeller wouldn’t turn—either because it had been fouled by Mal’s fishing line or mangled by the shark’s chewing. Qweep radioed his old Coast Guard buddies for help. Gordon worried that the Coast Guard wouldn’t be able to find them. After all, the sea was so vast and Qweep’s boat—hidden among the high swells and endless sky—was so insignificant. But in less than an hour a red-and-white Coast Guard cutter appeared on the horizon.

For Gordon, that hadn’t been nearly fast enough. While they’d been waiting, two new fins had appeared among the whitecaps and started circling the boat. Each fin—scarred and dirty brownish-grey—was approximately two feet high. According to Qweep, they almost certainly belonged to great whites.

And here's where Gordon's memory must have become conflated with a daydream, because when the Coast Guard cutter drew up alongside them, a doughnut-shaped life preserver flew down to them on a long silvery cord, and looking up, Gordon saw that it had been tossed by Smokey the Bear.

Smokey was wearing his trademark yellow ranger's hat and waving his great clawed forepaw from the ship's high deck railing while hailing them in that stentorian grizzly bear voice of his:

"Only *you* can prevent shark attacks," Smokey said.

Then, for some dream-like reason or another, rather than climbing aboard the cutter with Qweep and Mal, Gordon chose to stay behind in Qweep's boat as it was towed at roller coaster speeds into Morro Bay harbor with the menacing twin fins of the great white sharks charging close behind it.

And as if all that weren't nightmarish enough, the flag rockfish and the red snapper sloshing around in the five-gallon plastic bucket near Gordon's feet started shouting at him in Hebrew along the way. "*Tzaruch shemirah!*" one of them nattered like an old rabbi, while the other one groaned: "*Hasof bah!*" And Gordon, without ever having learned a word of Hebrew, somehow knew what those words meant:

Everyone needs to account for themselves, because the end is near.

Qweep's tiny boat started to get airborne on its tether, like a skipping stone, as the Coast Guard cutter towed it faster and faster.

Great... so what's next? Gordon thought. He looked over at Qweep's halibut in the big Igloo cooler, half-expecting it to burst into song like a slimy flat Edith Piaf. Meanwhile, the other two fish were commanding Gordon to pray and study the Torah.

In an instant, the Coast Guard cutter docked at the end of a long pier, and Gordon found himself climbing up a rickety wooden ladder precariously tacked to one of the pier's pilings while the great white sharks lunged and wetly snapped their blood-stained jaws at him from the water below. He pulled himself up over a railing and hit the pier running—afraid the sharks would grow wings and keep chasing him on dry land.

There was a gate in a chain-link fence at the other end of the pier and Gordon ran through it, absolutely out of his mind with terror. He

could hear the leathery wings of the great white sharks beating the air behind him. He sprinted through a parking lot, past a saltwater taffy shop and a bar called the Tiki Lounge, where a long-nosed, Easter Island-inspired Tiki god sat out in front gathering dust. Dodging between parked cars, Gordon headed for the sand dunes at the far end of the lot.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the winged sharks descending on him with their jaws frozen in scary rictuses, like the faces painted on the World War II fighter planes of the Flying Tigers air squadron. There was no way he'd be able to outrun them. He zigzagged through the dunes until he tripped on a piece of driftwood and fell, landing on his back in the hot sand.

For a moment, the sun blinded him. Then, just as Gordon expected to feel the impact of several tons of teeth and cartilage slamming into his chest and savagely devouring him, a dark figure reeking of smoke and ashes leaned over him, temporarily blocking out the sun's warmth.

"Gordon? Why are you so out of breath?" the dark figure asked him.

It was his mother, peering down at him from behind the splayed-open pages of a Harlequin Romance novel. The smoke was coming from another one of her infernal cigarettes.



When Lloyd stops the Bentley to wait for a line of traffic at the junction where Highway 46 dead-ends with the Pacific Coast Highway, Gordon sits there trying to figure out what his weird daydream might have been trying to tell him. *Flying sharks, talking fish, end-of-the-world predictions in Hebrew... what's it all mean?*

The whole thing had seemed much more vivid than any ordinary memory. His heart is still thudding from the anxiety it caused him. *But had any of it been real?*

Gordon knows there's an old Polaroid in a photo album back at home that shows him standing in an orange canvas life jacket on a fishing dock next to a huge dead mako shark with an ugly burnt-up hole in its forehead. He appears to be about five in the photo. So at

least that much had been real—but as for the rest... *who the fuck knows?* Maybe the whole thing had been a bad *Bardo* experience from a previous incarnation that he just happens to be able to recall.

“Why would we deliberately choose to incarnate in an evil world?” Gordon finds himself wondering out loud. It’s only after the words have left his mouth that he realizes everyone else can hear him.

“Why does the Easter Bunny stick his foot up your tender anus, Grasshopper?” D.H. asks in mocking response with faked Oriental inscrutability.

“Earth to Gordon...” says Skip. “Do you think we had a choice? We’re just here, dude. Get used to it.”

Gordon doesn’t bother to explain that he was thinking about the *Bardo*, not life on Earth. He realizes there isn’t much difference, anyway—aside, perhaps, from flying sharks and talking fish. But even without those novelties, life on Earth seems plenty evil enough. Especially when illuminated by the Gospel According to Lloyd.

“Adversity teaches us lessons that serenity and comfort can’t,” Lloyd says, in answer to Gordon’s question. “A frightening world is an edifying world to live in. What did you ever learn when everything was going the way you wanted?”

“Nothing much,” says Jimmy, “except how to get laid.”

“Exactly my point.”

As Lloyd turns the Bentley right instead of left onto the Pacific Coast Highway—away from Morro Bay—Gordon gets a terrible feeling of whirling, impending doom. He almost tells Lloyd to turn the car back around, although he knows that driving north is the only way for them to get to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. Still... he can’t shake the sick feeling that they’ve just made a wrong turn.

“Adversity is one thing,” says Gordon, “but I was talking about evil. I mean shit like kids dying from cancer, innocent people being tortured, John Lennon getting shot by that asshole Mark David Chapman—stuff like that.”

“Hey, shit happens,” Jimmy says with an insolent shrug.

“No, shit does *not* just happen,” Lloyd rebukes his nephew. “It’s intended. I may not be able to give you a solid metaphysical reason for

the existence of cancer, but I have some definite ideas about Mark David Chapman and the torture of innocents, if you'd care to hear them."

"Can't we just listen to the radio?" Twinker gripes.

"No way! I wanna hear this," Skip says.

"Yeah, explain evil, Lloyd!" D.H. chimes in. "Shooting John Lennon fucking sucked. How could any halfway decent God let that happen?"

"The CIA had more to do with it than God," Lloyd blusters. "Did you know that before Mark David Chapman shot John Lennon, he likely spent time at a CIA-sponsored training camp for assassins in Lebanon?"

"No way! Where'd you hear that?" D.H. asks.

"The YMCA sent him to Beirut in 1975, under the auspices of their ICCP/Abroad program, just weeks before the situation there devolved into full-scale civil war. The largest CIA station in the Middle East is located in Beirut—or at least it *was* located there until the terrorist bombing at the American Embassy wiped most of it out last month, killing sixty-three people. *Suicide bombers*—what can you do?... It was likely payback from the Iranians. The CIA has had a colorful history of engineering coups throughout the region—and back in 1975, Chapman might have been getting a firsthand look at one of them."

"Yeah, but just because the guy went to Lebanon, that doesn't mean he got sucked into a CIA mind control program," Gordon argues—even though, intuitively, the idea makes a great deal of sense to him.

"I'm not suggesting that such dire circumstances befall every young vagabond in Lebanon," Lloyd explains. "I'm only suggesting that it happened to Chapman because of what came after. He was a simpering, born-again YMCA youth counselor who *just happened* to take up an interest in firearms upon his return from Beirut. Less than two years later, he sold all his belongings and moved to Hawaii, where he *just happened* to be hospitalized for mental illness after a suicide attempt—just as Lee Harvey Oswald was hospitalized after *his* suicide attempt in Moscow. Forgive me for suggesting that a brief stay in a mental institution might be a convenient cover for a little MKULTRA tune-up, a chance for further indoctrination and training, but Chapman *just happened* to be hired as a maintenance worker by that same

institution—Castle Memorial Hospital. And after working there less than a year, he *just happened* to be able to afford to go on a six-week trip around the world. When he got back, he married his travel agent (an older Japanese woman, inevitably compared to Yoko) and then Chapman *just happened* to quit his job at Castle Memorial so he could take a low-paying job as a security guard at an apartment complex across the street from the Church of Scientology in Honolulu. And then he *just happened* to start taking flights into New York with a Charter Arms .38—the same type of revolver used by Arthur Bremer in his assassination attempt on George Wallace. And he *just happened* to make it past airport security every time.”

“Wait a second...” says Gordon. “What was that stuff about the Scientologists? Are you saying they’re mixed up in this assassination stuff, too?”

“Just stay with me and you’ll understand soon enough. For now, it might interest you to know that the phone number for Scientology’s worldwide spiritual headquarters in Clearwater, Florida, was found written on the wall of David Berkowitz’s apartment.”

“The Son of Sam was a Scientologist?” D.H. asks, incredulous.

“I’ll tell you more later,” Lloyd promises. “By the way, here’s another little tidbit you might find interesting: Mark David Chapman was born in Fort Worth, Texas, and Lee Harvey Oswald spent most of his youth growing up there.”

“So if either one of them had flown to the Moon before they got busted, they still could’ve voted.” Gordon has decided to just roll with Lloyd’s crazed connecting-of-the-dots—and even make some contributions of his own.

“You’re mocking me, but I can understand why. All this talk of conspiracies and coincidences sounds crazy, I know...” Lloyd concedes with a sigh. “*They* want it to sound crazy—so no one will take it seriously. By the way, you *do* know there’s a *They*, don’t you?”

“Sure. *They* want to fuck with our minds,” Skip says.

“Kind of like Lloyd,” says Twinker, whose mind—relative to Skip’s—isn’t quite so open.

“The simplest definition of a fascist is: *someone who wants dictatorial control over the will of others*. The *They* I’m speaking of are fascists, in the

broadest sense of that term,” Lloyd says. “*They* may not always be human, but *They* are always fascists. Their neurotic need for control extends even to murdering those who refuse to go along with their crimes and unspeakable lies. We’re all meat machines on this planet, and anyone can be killed by anyone else, so long as the killer is willing to accept the consequences for his or her actions. But *They* don’t want to accept any consequences, *ever*. So *They* invented trance-assassins like Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, James Earl Ray, Arthur Bremer, and Mark David Chapman—mind-controlled pawns who take the consequences *for* them.”

“Okay, so the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, I guess I can understand...” says D.H., “especially if *They* are fascists—or right-wing Republicans. But why would *They* want to kill John Lennon?”

“Remember, Ronald Reagan had just been elected President one month before Lennon’s assassination,” Lloyd reminds them. “And Reagan’s running mate—former CIA Director, George Bush—would soon be Vice President. John Lennon was an icon of the counterculture movement they despised. He also had enormous political clout that he often wielded in unconventional ways. Remember the Bed-Ins for Peace?”

“Yeah! They recorded ‘Give Peace A Chance’ during one of those,” D.H. recalls. “Timothy Leary and a bunch of other people sang it around the bed that John and Yoko stayed in for a week at that hotel in Montreal.”

“Right. Now put yourselves in Reagan and Bush’s shoes. They’ve already cut an illegal back-channel deal with the Iranian government to hold the American hostages until the day of Reagan’s inauguration—and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Their contempt for the Constitution and the American people will soon be so obvious that a counterculture revolutionary like Lennon would almost certainly protest. Lennon had just taken a five-year hiatus from recording and public life to raise his son, Sean, but he was out with a new album and seemed refreshed and ready to go again. He was due to become a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1981. By then, he would likely be challenging Reagan and Bush in public on issues like the environment, sexual morality, their arms-for-hostages deals, and the escalation of the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The last thing they wanted was a

politically active Beatle reawakening the old sentiments of the peace and love generation. And that doesn't even begin to touch upon the occult significance of Lennon's death."

"The occult significance?" Gordon asks.

"There was an invocation of the powers of darkness," Lloyd elaborates. "Or did you not know that Mark David Chapman claimed he'd prayed to Satan just hours before he called out Lennon's name and dropped into a combat stance to fire four bullets into him in front of the Dakota?"

"I never heard that," D.H. says grimly. "That born-again asshole!"

"Satan is for pussies," Jimmy huffs.

"Satan is one of the most powerful egregores on this planet," Lloyd corrects him, "second only to that egregore we call *God*—although, of course, the supposedly divine assistance from the *God* egregore has a distressing tendency to vary."

"The born-again Christians would say you're going to hell for telling us stuff like that," Gordon jokes with Lloyd.

"Yes, those born-again Christians absolutely love sending people to hell, don't they?" Lloyd observes. "Yet they seem to have no trouble breaking their own rules—"Thou shalt not kill" being chief among them. And how about the Sermon on the Mount? You don't hear the Moral Majority invoking 'Blessed are the peacemakers' when the budget-busting Pentagon goes about its business, or 'Blessed are the merciful' when their man Reagan is droning on and on about the Soviet's Evil Empire.... I've been toying with the idea of doing a public lecture in the near future. I'm going to call it, 'Quantum Physics and Reaganomics: How Much Longer Until the Fabric of Reality is Ripped to Shreds?'"

"Wasn't that freaky little possessed girl in *The Exorcist* named Reagan?" Jimmy asks half-facetiously. It's been approximately ten years since he and Gordon sneaked in to see *The Exorcist* when they were boys, but Jimmy still rates it as one of his all-time favorite movies.

"Although the two names sound alike—and the connection has an undeniable *frisson*—I think you know their spelling differs," Lloyd says. "But I'll lay odds you didn't know that the writer responsible for *The*

Exorcist, William Peter Blatty, was an intelligence officer who'd been stationed in Lebanon."

"You're not gonna tell us he trained Mark David Chapman, are you?" Skip asks. There are limits to even Skip's credulity.

"No, of course not. That was way before Chapman's time," Lloyd says. "William Peter Blatty worked for the United States Information Agency in Beirut sometime back in the fifties. The USIA devotes its energies to so-called 'public diplomacy'—which might better be described as 'propaganda.' And if you think about it, *The Exorcist* could reasonably be considered propaganda as well—and not propaganda for Satan or the Roman Catholic Church, as one might initially presume. Blatty was very specific about the identity of the entity that possessed little Regan. It was the ancient Sumerian demon, *Pazuzu*."

"Oh, no. Here we go again..." Twinker says with a roll of her eyes.

"Propaganda for Pazuzu?" D.H. just wants to make sure he has it straight.

"Propaganda for the ancient gods of Mesopotamia, including the Lam and Those Who Shall Remain Nameless," Lloyd says with a wink directed toward Gordon.

"Are we talking about aliens again?" Skip asks.

"What if there was a hidden purpose to all the assassinations we've been talking about, and to movie productions like *The Exorcist*, and other often-misconstrued events, like serial killings and Satanic Ritual Abuse?" Lloyd asks them. "What would you say if I told you that all those occurrences were highly concerted efforts at thinning the veil between this world and the evil on the other side of it?"

"I'd say it's time to up the ol' Thorazine dosage there, Bud," Gordon jokes.

"Yeah, that's just fucking nuts," D.H. says, protesting perhaps a bit too much.

"*Finally!*" Twinker shouts with an exaggerated show of relief.

"Why don't you guys just shut up and listen?" Jimmy says. "It makes a whole lot of sense, if you ask me."

"Oh *please*..." Twinker scoffs.

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

"It's not so far-fetched," Lloyd suggests. "Blood sacrifices to appease the gods have been going on since time immemorial."

"Yeah, but times aren't so immoral now," Gordon counters.

"Don't be so sure.... Disneyland hasn't built a reproduction of Teotihuacán's Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl and the Avenue of the Dead so they can stage live reenactments of Aztec sacrifices for the Mouseketeer crowd—*yet*—but every Easter you can find at least three Jesus snuff films playing on television. And what is the Christian Eucharist if not a human sacrifice ritual in symbolic form? It's called *theophagy*—the eating of God. Taken together, what do the cross and the Eucharist signify? Rome was using them to set an example, a meme for slaves: 'Go up against the Powers That Be,' they're telling us, 'and not only will we crucify you—we'll eat you, too.'"

Lloyd has gone so far over the top that Gordon, Jimmy, and D.H. start to laugh.

"Go ahead, laugh all you want," says Lloyd, "but every Sunday we're treated to the spectacle of all those God-eaters chowing down the flesh and slurping up the blood of Christ. It's obscene, really... Jesus is served up more often than Big Macs! Every year, more than a billion bodies of Christ are swallowed and turned into fecal matter."

"I can't believe you just said that!" says Skip. "Now whenever I take a crap, I'll have to think about Jesus."

Jimmy cuts loose with a horrendous fart. "What's that smell?" he asks merrily. "The Father, Son, or the Holy Ghost?"

"Oh my *God*..." D.H. exhales, holding his nose, "I'm so glad I'm an atheist."

They've reached the city limits of a town called Cambria. Tall gnarled spires of Monterey Pines rise up toward the sky on either side of the highway. Vacation homes on stilts dot the shaded green hillsides and more homes are nestled along unpaved roads cutting through lush banks of forest ferns and ivy.

Up ahead, the hills give way to an open stretch of reddish-brown beach strewn with tide pools and rock formations upended by long-ago earthquakes (*Moonstone Beach*, the sign along the highway reads). Overlooking that beach—high on the last cliff with a zigzagging, nine-story flight of stairs leading up to it—there's an oddly round shingled

cabin with a faded redwood deck out in front of it and a black tin chimney flue silently belching smoke. Imagining that he can smell the wood smoke (*with a hint of patchouli...*) coming from that very chimney, Gordon thinks to himself: *What a great place!*

Lloyd has spied the cabin, too. “Look... it’s one of Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic domes. Some hippie dropout has made quite a nice little paradise for himself up there.”

“Check out those stained glass windows!” D.H. exclaims.

On the nearest side of the cabin there’s an amber stained glass window in the shape of a smiling crescent moon, and another brilliant apricot one in front radiating flowery spikes like a happy child’s drawing of the sun. *I’m going to live there someday*, Gordon’s deep intuition is telling him—but he doesn’t know how that will ever happen.

“Buckminster Fuller came up with an excellent alternative name for the CIA,” Lloyd mentions. “Has anyone heard of it?”

Of course, no one has.

“He calls it the *Corporate Invisible Army*,” Lloyd says with a wry smile. “There’s a very-hard-to-find book called *The Secret Team* that explains exactly how the CIA and its corporate allies have become the shadow government of the United States—and of the whole world, for that matter. It was written by Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, the first Chief of Special Operations with the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Colonel Prouty also served as a liaison officer for the Air Force and the CIA, so he truly knows the territory, so to speak. I can lend out my copy, if anyone’s interested in reading it.”

“If I tried reading that book right now, I think my head would explode,” says Gordon. “I’m just trying to get a handle on what you’ve already told us. I mean, tell me if I’m even close here: the egregore of the CIA got infected by the Nazi’s egregore during Operation PAPERCLIP, and now the CIA works as sort of an invisible army for the fascist egregores of multinational corporations.”

“Right,” says Lloyd.

“But at the same time, the CIA has been experimenting with these mind control programs in prisons, cults, and mental institutions—and I guess in places like Lebanon and on military bases, too—so they can

send assassins out into the world to kill people like John Lennon and JFK.”

“Right again.”

“Now here’s where I get confused.... Are the assassinations politically motivated, or do they somehow benefit the corporations? Or is it really about human sacrifices and ‘thinning the veil’ like you said—or feeding the Moon, or whatever?”

“The answer is: All of the above.”

“Shit! Then I’m still confused.”

Lloyd reaches over and pats Gordon’s knee. “You’re closer to understanding than you might think,” he says. “The key lies in knowing that interdimensional aliens secretly control the people at the top levels of all the world’s secret societies—”

“—and from there they control everything else,” Gordon says, remembering.

“Ritualistic ceremonies, such as you’ll find in secret societies, serve to activate the reptilian traits in our own brains that allow us to be easily hypnotized and controlled,” Lloyd explains. “Now, don’t get me wrong. Spirituality, in general, is a fine thing. But ritualistic behavior—even within a spiritual context—is to be avoided at all costs.”

“Does that mean we’re not supposed to attend Mass?” Twinker asks cynically. She’s a lapsed Catholic, but she’s feeling a sudden need to defend her former faith.

“Well, you might ask yourself: ‘Do I really need to eat Jesus? Or isn’t it enough that I’ve asked him to guide me and strengthen my heart?’” After a thoughtful pause, Lloyd adds: “Besides, don’t you think the Catholic Church might have some unresolved control issues?”

“The fact that they won’t allow women to be priests kind of sucks,” Twinker admits. “I mean, are women supposed to be less spiritually evolved than men? *I don’t think so....*”

“You won’t get any argument there from me,” Lloyd says. “I share Wilhelm Reich’s belief that the suppression of paganism did a great disservice to the evolution of the human psyche. In many ways, I think we were all better off during the late, great matriarchal societies, when female deities and priestesses reigned.”

"I'm pretty sure they had their share of control issues, too," says Gordon, thinking about his mother.

"Yes, but sexual repression wasn't one of them," Lloyd says. "As I mentioned earlier, certain Catholic priests are in the habit of molesting little boys, but nothing is being done about it. The Church just keeps covering it up, transferring the guilty parties from church to church so they can go on molesting victim after victim. That's happening because some of the most illustrious (and supposedly celibate) leaders in the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the Roman Catholic Church also happen to be sexual deviants—and they refuse to take any disciplinary actions for fear of exposure. They don't want the public to see what sexual repression has made of them, no more than those child-molesting priests do."

"That's so twisted," Twinker says, "I can hardly believe it."

"Unfortunately, it's true. The stories are already creeping into the newspapers."

"Yeah, but aren't the newspapers in on this whole game, too?" Gordon asks.

"Newspapers have certainly been used to promote evil agendas," Lloyd admits, "but a free press is still one of our last, best hopes for preserving our democracy. And although American democracy might be more myth than a reality these days, evil hasn't completely overrun the country. There are good men and women in the Catholic Church, and good people who choose to become journalists."

"But if the guys at the top who own the newspapers refuse to run their stories, then how will we ever find out about this stuff so we can do something about it?"

"Messages get slipped between the lines, or sometimes journalists find smaller venues. Somehow, the word gets out. What you should always remember is that there are far more people like yourselves—people of good intent—than there are of them."

"I'm not sure my own intentions are always that great," Gordon confesses.

"You're still young, and it's a struggle, to be sure..." Lloyd says, "but trust me, you and your friends are already well along the path in the right direction."

"But not me!" Jimmy pipes up from the backseat.

"No, perhaps not you so much, you little shithead," Lloyd jokes with him. "Even with the top down, I can still smell that hideous thumping fart of yours."

"That's because I just let out another one," Jimmy says with a malicious grin. "It was SBD this time. *Silent, But Deadly*."

"Charming," says Lloyd.

D.H., Twinker, and Skip cover their noses and groan.

By the time the air clears, they're six miles further up the road, approaching San Simeon and Hearst Castle. Zebras graze among a herd of cattle in the barbed wire fenced pastures to their right. Lloyd points to the high white castle on a distant hill and says: "Now there's a monument to alien-inspired megalomania and journalism used for evil ends. Have you heard about the cable that William Randolph Hearst sent to Frederic Remington in Cuba before he goaded the U.S. into the Spanish-American War? Hearst said, 'You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war.' History shows that he got what he wanted. And so did his unseen controllers."

"Did a bunch of aliens start flying around after that war, too?" asks Skip.

"Just prior to it, actually..." Lloyd answers. "There was a wave of mysterious 'airship' sightings being reported across the U.S. in 1897, while in nearby Cuba hundreds of thousands of 'rebels' were dying in concentration camps run by the occupying Spanish forces. The Spanish-American War was declared in February of 1898 after the sinking of the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbor—a false flag terror event that may have provided later inspiration for Pearl Harbor. But as wars go, the Spanish-American War was relatively minor... especially in light of what came after. It was really just a convenient excuse for the U.S. to take control of the Philippines for reasons having to do with the opium trade. *That*, however, is beside the point. The point I was trying to make was that Hearst and his well-compensated crew of yellow journalists were reliable agitators for war from about 1897 onward."

So now Gordon knows the true meaning of that phrase "yellow journalists." They're agitators for war—purveyors of jingoism, *schadenfreude*, and disinformation. Flack men for the Anunnaki.

“Okay, here’s another thing I’m kind of confused about,” says Gordon. “You say that interdimensional aliens, or the Lam, feed off wars and human fear and suffering—and so do those old Mesopotamian gods whose name you won’t let me say, for some dumb reason.... But what about the egregores? I mean, don’t some of *them* get stronger from fear and suffering, too? And if an alien or the CIA’s egregore was really controlling Mark David Chapman, then why didn’t he pray to *that* thing before he shot John Lennon, instead of praying to Satan?”

“Well, you have to understand...” Lloyd says, taking things slowly, “Satanism, at its core, is really about the manipulation of another person’s consciousness and the theft of their life force—or *orgone*, as Wilhelm Reich called it. And Satan, of course, is a malevolent egregore that has taken on an independent existence of its own. The Satan egregore captures and absorbs the orgone of others—and puts it to no good use, I might add.... So when Mark David Chapman was praying to Satan, he might as well have been praying to the Lam or to any other interdimensional entity that feeds on the life force of others. Archons, Egregores, the Watchers, Those Who Were Cast Down—in a way, all those names are interchangeable. They all refer to something similar. In this case, it was an entity that came here with the intent to feast on the blood and orgone of John Lennon. I can use a more familiar term for that entity, if that will make it easier for you to visualize:

“We’re talking about a fallen angel.”

“So fallen angels are running global corporations and giving orders to the CIA?” Gordon is having a hard time believing that.

“And those angels are getting off on assassinations?” D.H. is equally incredulous.

“That is... *so... great!*” Jimmy exclaims.

“You shouldn’t act so surprised,” Lloyd chides Gordon. “After all, you’re the one who’s studied Gnosticism. The Gnostics suspected something like this all along.”

“Yeah, but when you put it like that—*fallen angels*—all of a sudden it just sounds so weird... and, I don’t know... *Christian*. And then they want our blood?”

“Yes, fear and suffering makes them stronger, so they can physically manifest in our world through the interdimensional portals that have been opened. Then, once they’re here, the orgone energy they absorb directly from the blood of ritual sacrifices allows them to maintain physical form.”

“Bloodsucking angels...” Skip muses aloud. “That’s seriously fucked up.”

“In a way, the situation is to our advantage,” Lloyd explains. “You see, if they don’t get that blood, they have to turn right around and head back to the inner realms. The fallen angels really aren’t supposed to have much to do with us here, so it’s difficult for them to spend time on Earth without revealing themselves for the vampires they’ve truly become. We hide from them in the material world until we’re spiritually strong enough to confront them on more level ground.”

“Yeah, but from the way you describe things, they’re having way too much fun with us already,” Gordon complains. “I mean, you make it sound like there’s so much evil around that we’re practically soaking in it.”

“Well, what can I tell you, Gordon?” Lloyd shrugs. “Life is a river—and that river is full of lost sharks.”



You could be forgiven for assuming that Lloyd is getting off on some kind of sick mind-trip that involves scaring the piss out of gullible teenagers (to paraphrase Dorothy on her way through the spooky forest of Oz: “Vampires and Archons and demons—oh my!”). That assumption, however, would be wrong. While Lloyd, on his fat surface, might seem like a walking, talking sausage casing filled up with nine different kinds of asshole, I can assure you that in the murky, polluted depths of his soul he genuinely wants to help. He just has a daimonic way of going about it.

You should actually give Lloyd major points for trying to pull back the curtain on consensus reality and show Gordon and those guys what the Dark Brotherhood wants to keep hidden. After all, the world won’t get any better unless darkness is exposed to the light. Most abuse happens when the abuser thinks no one is watching. Elitists exploit the masses while hiding behind their multimedia smokescreens. The CIA sends its assassins in the guise of

ordinary slobs like Mark David Chapman. But when everybody can see what's going on, the bad stuff has to stop—or at least slow down some.

The trouble with conveying the truth about the realms of deep politics and high weirdness is that most people just can't get past the cognitive dissonance (their brain's childish way of shutting down and saying, in effect: "I don't want to know about all this horrible stuff! It's too much!"). But even once you've gotten past the cognitive barriers to entry, once you've begun to understand just how bad the situation really is, you still have to figure out how to do something about it. And that's hard... but it gets easier as more people find out about it. So the First Rule of Fighting Evil (or confronting Archons or integrating the shadow or whatever...) is simply this:

Find out what they don't want you to know and spread the word.

Let me give you an example: You know all about the Love Song of J. Edgar Hoover, right? How he ruled the FBI as its Director for almost fifty years. How he lived with his mom for a good portion of that time and then spent his last four decades in an intimate relationship with a guy named Clyde Tolson. (But he wasn't gay! J. Edgar Hoover persecuted the hell out of people who were gay!) How he obsessively built up dossiers full of incriminating evidence against friends and enemies alike—using wiretaps, buggings, burglaries... whatever he deemed necessary. How he then used those dossiers for purposes of blackmail whenever the mood suited him. How he really went overboard in the mid-fifties, when he started violating the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens by spying on them with COINTELPRO, a counterintelligence program designed to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and otherwise neutralize" the activities of so-called "subversive" groups and their individual members. Targets of COINTELPRO included the Socialist Workers Party, the Students for a Democratic Society, Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and almost any anti-war protestor who could be considered a significant asset to the New Left—including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and John Lennon. Techniques used by COINTELPRO agents and their paid informants included covert infiltration, psychological warfare, dirty tricks, false arrests, harassment through corrupt legal systems, unfairly targeted tax audits, "accidental" violence, brute force, and (of course...) assassinations.

And how do we even know that COINTELPRO existed? It was kept secret until March 8th, 1971, when a group of left-wing radicals calling

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

themselves “The Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI” broke into an FBI field office in Media, Pennsylvania, and stole hundreds of the agency’s files, which were then passed along to news agencies that published the juiciest extracts. Shortly thereafter, J. Edgar Hoover was forced to publicly declare the reign of COINTELPRO over. Then he died in 1972, most likely from aggravation.

Let us now spend a moment in silent praise of certain left-wing radicals....

Of course, the FBI didn’t stop spying on U.S. citizens after Hoover died. That would’ve been about as likely as every crooked politician suddenly deciding not to run for office after Nixon resigned. The FBI just got sneakier and the Republicans elected Reagan and Bush. And who knows what happened to those left-wing radicals? You can bet the FBI wasn’t planning to just leave them alone. Maybe some of them went into hiding, like Abbie. Maybe some of them made the transition from yippies to yuppies, like Jerry. Maybe some of them met violent ends, like John.... (Let’s hope not.)

Violence is pretty much an unsolvable riddle while you’re spending time on Earth. It’s like a fucked-up Zen koan. You can’t just be a coward and roll over when someone threatens you with violence, but you can’t meet violence with more violence, either. Martin Luther King eloquently explained why when he said:

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.”

Of course, we all know what happened to Martin Luther King....

So what’s the best way to deal with violence? Mahatma Gandhi’s path of non-violent resistance looked like it had potential—and he accomplished great things with it, like the independence of India in 1947. But we all know what happened to Gandhi.... When a guy goes around saying there are lots of causes he’d die for, but none that he’d kill for, I guess some people think he’s just asking to be assassinated. But we should also remember that Gandhi said this:

“When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of love and truth has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall—think of it, ALWAYS.”

Anyway, fuck assassins and their bone-deep dumb methods of dealing with people who are superior to them in every important way. From the perspective of your immortal spirit, knowing that consciousness survives on the Other Side, do you really want to live in a world where some dark-minded dickhead gets to take you down whenever you try to do the right thing? No, I didn't think so... which brings us to the Second Rule of Fighting Evil:

Don't play by the rules of their games.

So speak up, do what needs to be done, but don't make yourself an easy target for the shooting gallery. And don't go to war, kids. Avoid all needle drugs (Abbie Hoffman said that first, then he added: "The only dope worth shooting is Nixon"). As a general rule, try to avoid becoming addicted to anything, if you can. Don't become stockbrokers or gamblers or mindless consumers of products you don't need. Corporatism will collapse if we don't buy what they're selling—their weapons and waste, their fear-spreading memes, their self-serving versions of history. Lloyd is absolutely right when he talks about the fascist tendencies of corporate eggregores. But don't just take my word for it. Benito Mussolini, the 20th-Century Poster Boy for Fascism, said it best:

"Fascism should more properly be called corporatism because it is the merger of state and corporate power."

So on the one hand, you have Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, on the other, Benito Mussolini.... Care to choose a side? You might think the right choice would be obvious, but from the perspective of 1983 (and 2003, as well), it looks like the spirit of Mussolini owes Reagan and Bush—and the Republican Party, in general—a big old wet, sloppy kiss.

Lloyd is about to head off into territory that makes Mussolini's Fascist Italy look a fairy garden tea party. He plans to elaborate on a pet theory of his about how ritual murders tend to occur around open interdimensional portals. A lot of it's bullshit, if you ask me. Everything is connected (believe me, I know...), but Lloyd seems kind of myopic in the way he draws the lines. Sometimes I think he's too narrowly focused on the negative, enjoying the view through Aleister Crowley's satanic-red-tinted glasses a bit too much. It's like old Milton said: "The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

Anyway, there were other things—good things—happening around 1947, which Lloyd might have mentioned for the sake of balance.

One of those good things was the initial translation of the Gnostic codices from the Nag Hammadi Library, which had been discovered in Upper Egypt about a year earlier, in December of 1945. Philip K. Dick made a big deal out of this in VALIS and his Exegesis. It had been revealed to him (or so he claimed) that a creature of pure information—a “plasmate”—had been sealed in an earthenware jar along with the codices and buried under the Egyptian sands sometime around 370 AD. After the rediscovered codices, written in Coptic, were finally translated and read again for the first time in 1947, the dormant plasmate was revived. How? Phil described it this way: “As living information the plasmate travels up the optic nerve of a human to the pineal body. It uses the human brain as a female host... in which to replicate itself into its active form.” That active form—“a human being to which the plasmate had crossbonded”—Phil called a Homoplasmate. He thought he might be one himself.

Phil considered this particular plasmate to be nothing less than the Logos, as embodied by Jesus Christ. The Logos, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the True God were all identical in Phil’s cosmology. So it would follow that the translation of the Nag Hammadi Library had been a very good thing. New Homoplasmates were being created. All the original ones had been killed off by the Romans—or the Empire, in Phil’s terminology (or the Dark Brotherhood, in mine). In Phil’s interpretation of Gnosticism—gleaned from translations of the Nag Hammadi texts—man belongs with the True God in a struggle against this screwed-up world and the angry, deluded Demiurge that created it. The True God “has outwitted the powers of this world, ventured here to help us, and we know him as the Logos.”

(As for why the True God allowed the Demiurge to get us into such a shitstorm of trouble in the first place, Phil could never quite figure that out.)

By now the thought might be dawning that you could be a Homoplasmate, too. Well, sure you could... why not? All you need is some plasmate traveling up your optic nerve. You can even get that here, if I’ve done my homework right. Most likely, though, you already carry the Logos inside you, along with your Divine Spark. The tricky part is learning to listen to it and do what it suggests without your ego getting in the way. In that respect, it’s kind of like working with a daimon. In fact, it’s almost exactly like working with a daimon. The only difference is that a daimon’s interactions will tend to be more personalized and idiosyncratic, because they’re tailored toward the evolution of your soul, whereas the wisdom of the

Logos has more universal applications, because it's a direct connection to the True God. Otherwise, everything that I've said about daimons applies.

Look, I know it sounds weird—almost schizophrenic—to suggest that you should get in touch with an alien source of language and images inside your own mind that has a God-like level of wisdom, but seventeen-hundred years ago the Logos was a commonly accepted phenomenon. Ancient philosophers like Heraclitus did everything they could to get in touch with the Logos for guidance and revelations. The authoritative over-reaching of scientific materialism has made that idea seem preposterous, but I can assure you, the Logos exists. In fact, it inspired the Third and Final Rule of Fighting Evil:

Listen to your angels and everything will turn out fine.

By angels I mean guardian angels, or your daimon, or the Logos—whatever you have access to. Try not to listen to demons, which are deranged angels in disguise. Don't worry... there's no reason to wuss out here because you're afraid of dialing a wrong number. With experience you'll find that demons are as easy to differentiate from angels as Dracula is from Santa Claus—and experience, in the long run, is what incarnating on Earth is all about.

So come on! What are you waiting for? Let's go out there and kick some demon ass!

STILL MORE ANAMNESIS

A few miles north of Hearst Castle, near the Piedras Blancas lighthouse, Lloyd pulls the Bentley over to the side of the road in front of a double-hinged gate of rusty scrap iron welded into the shape of two gigantic female breasts. Just beyond the gate, at the end of a dirt path, a small white cottage is perched precariously on the edge of an eroding sea cliff.

“What’s up with the titty gate?” asks Jimmy. It’s the obvious question.

“Linus Pauling owns this place,” Lloyd replies. “He bought it with money from one or the other of his Nobel Prizes. He also has a bigger house further up the road toward Big Sur, so he rents this one out to a metal sculptor named Peter Fels. I thought we might drop in to see Linus if he’s not busy today, but I wanted to give him fair warning by using Peter’s phone first.”

“You’re friends with Linus Pauling?” Gordon asks him.

“I guess you could say that, yes.... I used to get out this way quite often in my younger days. Back then, it was amazing whom you’d run into while soaking in Esalen’s hot tubs or enjoying the sun out on the big deck at Nepenthe. John Lilly, Henry Miller, Robinson Jeffers, Alan Watts... they all lived around here.”

“Cool,” says Gordon. He’s read their books—at least one from each of them.

“Yes, it was an astonishing array of intellects for such a sparsely populated area. And Linus, of course, was always at the top of the heap.” Lloyd gets out of the Bentley and tugs somewhere deep inside the cleavage of the gate. It appears to be locked.

"Maybe you need to unhook a bra strap or something..." D.H. suggests unhelpfully from the open backseat.

Lloyd grabs an iron nipple with both hands and tugs violently, making the gate sway and creak. It still refuses to yield. His palms come away streaked with powdery rust, which he almost wipes on his immaculate tropical-weight worsted slacks, but then he thinks better of it.

"Why don't you just climb the fence?" Jimmy asks. It sounds like a dare.

Eyeing the barbed wire fence on either side of the gate, Lloyd says petulantly: "You don't think I can, do you?"

"I didn't say that." The implication is that it would be an easy climb for Jimmy, or anyone else in the car, but it might pose more of a problem for someone of Lloyd's massive girth.

Tentatively, Lloyd sets his foot on the lowest rung of barbed wire and tests it like a ballerina practicing her pliés. *Flex. Squat. Repeat....* It's reminding Gordon of those tutu-wearing hippos from Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (if there was ever a movie designed to hypnotically manipulate the minds of small children, it was that one...). As more of Lloyd's weight shifts to his raised foot, the barbed wire squeaks against the staples in the wooden posts. Then, all at once, the wire snaps to the ground with a whistling twang. In that same instant, the back seam rips out of Lloyd's expensive slacks, revealing a fold of maroon-striped silk underpants trapped between his spasmodically clenching butt crack.

"Oh damn!" curses Lloyd while everyone else tries not to laugh.

Gordon gets out of the Bentley. "I'll go get the guy," he volunteers, smiling. "What's his name again?"

"Peter," Lloyd says while trying—without success—to get a look at his own ass. "You also might run into his wife, Phoebe. Ask her if she has a needle and some thread."

Examining the colossal rip in Lloyd's pants, Gordon says, "I'll ask her, but if she didn't apprentice with Omar the Tent Maker, I doubt she'll be able to do much." Gordon gets over the fence before Lloyd can even scowl at him.

Smelling sage and saltwater mist, Gordon jogs up the path to the cottage and knocks on the screened front porch. No one answers. A

brilliant blue Steller's Jay greets him with a gruff, gargling squawk from the edge of the roof. Otherwise, the dusty white cottage seems almost supernaturally tranquil.

Circling around to the side of the cottage, Gordon peers through a window and sees a large oil painting on the opposite wall. It depicts naked caricatures of Adam and Eve being banished, shame-faced and skulking, from a curly-leafed Paradise by the radiant pointing hand of God. They're heading toward the aisles of a tacky discount department store with a Blue Light Special in progress. A title in jagged pink fuchsia is scrawled across the painting's lower left corner: *Expulsion to K-Mart*. To the right is the artist's signature: *Phoebe Palmer*. Peter's wife is apparently a painter. A good one.

"Gordon? Anybody there?" Lloyd calls out from the other side of the fence.

"I guess nobody's home," Gordon turns and tells him, heading back up the path.

Seeing Phoebe's painting and the gate of iron tits has led Gordon back to thoughts about his mother. He wonders if she'll kick him out of the house when he gets back from his trip. If she does, he tells himself it doesn't matter. He has enough money saved to rent his own apartment, if that's how she wants to play it. Even if he didn't have the money, he'd still find a way to get by somehow. There's no good reason for him to keep putting up with Cynthia's chronically pissed-off mother routine now. He's not afraid of her. He doesn't care if she cuts him out of her life forever. The only thing he ever wanted from her was the one thing she never had to offer: a mother's love.

"Onward and upward," Lloyd says as Gordon climbs back into the Bentley and slams the door with a satisfying thump.

Of course, there's Derek to think about... Gordon tells himself as he takes one last look at the iron titty gate before the Bentley pulls away. He wants to make sure his little brother doesn't grow up cowed and stunted by their anger-crazed mother. It won't be easy. We've all been culturally conditioned to defer to authority for thousands of years, even though history clearly shows that those we entrust to protect us often end up abusing us. But hopefully, Gordon will be able to help Derek find a way to open the gates to his own unique version of freedom—just as Lloyd, in his perverse way, has been helping him.

With that thought and a strange jolt of concentrated focus, Gordon makes the iron gates swing open in Linus Pauling's driveway.

No one else sees it happen, and Gordon is too stunned to point it out to anyone as the Bentley races along the road and the gates recede behind them. Besides, it could have just been the wind... just like it could have been his mother who stopped her own hands from slapping him at the start of the trip, possibly because she didn't want to embarrass herself in front of Gordon's friends. *Psychic powers? Remote influencing? Maybe I just believe my own bullshit*, he thinks.

A second ago he was elated, but now Gordon just feels exhausted and depressed.

Lloyd gives him a sidelong glance while pretending to concentrate on his driving. "I saw what you did in the rearview mirror," he mutters so that only Gordon can hear him. "Don't worry... the exhaustion is a normal part of the process. You'll get used to it."

"So I really did that? Opened the gates?" Gordon mutters back.

"You bet."

Gordon's mood improves substantially.

A stiff breeze off the ocean hits the side of the Bentley and almost peels off Lloyd's toupee. "Has anyone heard the story about how Linus Pauling won a Nobel Peace Prize because Robert Oppenheimer tried to fuck his wife?" Lloyd asks brightly, glancing over his shoulder into the backseat.

"Lloyd, you're more full of *loco* stories than any *pendejo* speed freak I ever met," Twinker says. "Why don't you just calm down some?"

"We still have miles to go and this will be educational," Lloyd says, patting his toupee back into place as if it were a frisky terrier. "Besides, what better rivalry can you think of? It's the Father of Molecular Biology versus the Father of the Atomic Bomb."

"*Tyrannosaurus Rex versus Megalodon: Who would win?*" Jimmy says, recalling the childhood mind games that he and Gordon used to play.

"Oppenheimer would win," Skip decides. "The Atomic Bomb would blow away Molecular Biology every time. No problem."

"But so far, it hasn't—at least not on a worldwide scale as of yet," Lloyd points out. "And Oppenheimer didn't win, if it's the Nobel Prize we're talking about. But Linus won it. *Twice*."

“And those guys were wife-swappers?” D.H. asks.

“No, nothing like that...” Lloyd demurs, “but they were once close friends. They worked together at Caltech in the late-1920s, where they were planning to mount a joint inquiry into the nature of the chemical bond. Oppenheimer had a generous, flamboyant nature in those days. He’d given his cherished boyhood rock collection to Linus and he wrote fawning poems to him about Dante, mineralogy, and pederasty. It’s more likely that he had the hots for *Linus*, rather than for Linus’ wife, Ava Helen.”

“That’s perverted,” Skip snorts with more amusement than disgust.

“Be that as it may,” Lloyd continues, “one day in 1929 while Linus was away at work, our suave future Father of the Atomic Bomb invited Ava Helen to go away with him for a diddling down in Mexico. Ava Helen—*that flirt*—was secretly flattered, but she rebuffed him and dutifully informed her husband of Oppenheimer’s sleazy sexual advances. Linus felt he had no choice but to promptly end their friendship.”

“They could’ve just done a three-way instead,” D.H. suggests.

“I’m sure that would’ve been agreeable to Oppenheimer,” Lloyd says. “After he became Scientific Director of the Manhattan Project, he tried to make amends by inviting Linus to be in charge of the Chemistry Division of the atomic bomb team. Linus declined Oppenheimer’s offer by saying he was a pacifist, but you have to wonder how much his decision was influenced by jealousy and sexual competitiveness.”

“You’re not going the dime-store Doctor Freud route on us, are you?”

“No, Gordon, that would be beneath me...” Lloyd replies, drawing the words out. “But you have to admit it’s curious that Linus Pauling became the foremost opponent of above-ground nuclear weapons testing after the war. It’s as if he wanted to thwart all of Oppenheimer’s priapic atomic orgasms—or at least keep them hidden from public view.”

“Or maybe he was just worried about the radioactive fallout,” Gordon counters.

“Yes, well, whatever his motives, Linus’ relentless campaigning resulted in the Partial Test Ban Treaty, signed into law by John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev in 1963. On the day the treaty went into force, Linus was awarded a second Nobel Prize for his efforts.”

“What was the first one for?” Twinker asks.

“It was for his work applying the insights of quantum physics to the realm of molecular biology—or, as some would call it, *quantum chemistry*. You should read his magnum opus, *The Nature of the Chemical Bond*. It’s really quite enlightening.”

“Oh, I’ll bet...” says Skip, meaning, *The hell with that...*

“And when you and Linus get together you guys just sit around and talk about... what?” Gordon asks. “Egregores and anal probes? Bloodsucking angels?”

“For the most part our talk centers around vitamin C, our failing prostates, and the Holographic Model of the Universe, if you really must know...” Lloyd says with a bored sigh. “I save the bloodsucking angels for my more intimate friends.”

“Lucky us,” says Twinker.

“So we’re just a guinea pig audience that you use to see if your more bullshit theories will fly,” D.H. says, meaning no real disrespect.

“It’s not bullshit!” Jimmy objects with great vehemence.

“No, it’s not.” Lloyd pouts, pretending to be hurt. “It’s no coincidence that Robert Oppenheimer set off the first successful nuclear explosion in a New Mexico desert basin called *Jornada del Muerte*—or ‘Journey of Death’—during what is now called the *Trinity Test*. He knew what he was getting into. His atomic bomb was a fiery fart in the face of God—a triumph for the Dark Brotherhood that mocked the Holy Trinity. Think of all the fear generated by the ensuing Cold War. Think of all those innocent people vaporized into mere shadows on the walls at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and all those disfigured by atomic heat and radiation. For the Lam and their ilk, Oppenheimer’s infernal achievement must have come across like an exquisite snifter of brandy at the end of that energy banquet known to us as the Second World War.”

“Jimmy farted on God, too,” D.H. says with a tattletale’s childish whine.

“Only because I ate Jesus,” Jimmy sneers, unrepentant.

Switching to the intonations of a Harlem street preacher, D.H. swats Jimmy on the back of his head and says, “You’re a stench in God’s nostrils, you filthy heretic!”

Jimmy swats D.H. back, saying, “Fuck off and die, you self-righteous puss!”

“Boys! Boys! You see how quickly religion devolves into conflict?” Lloyd says, as if he’s proving some sort of point. “Just the merest mention of God is enough to start a fight. We’re all still spiritual infants, made terrible by religious certainties that cause us to go around like holy hitmen, killing others of different faiths. We have no business fooling around with nuclear weapons that could make the Earth uninhabitable—*especially* when you consider the frighteningly low caliber of the politicians we’ve been electing to office these days.”

“Man, I was just joking around...” D.H. says. “Don’t make a federal case out of it.”

“Yeah, we didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” says Jimmy.

“You have my sincerest apologies if I jumped to the wrong conclusions.”

“That’s okay. Anyway,” D.H. hastens to add, “you’re right about Reagan and his Armageddon Posse. *Muy frightamenté.*”

“Tell us more about the bloodsucking angels, Big Guy,” Jimmy says to get back on Lloyd’s good side. “Was that Oppenheimer dude one of them?”

“I suspect he was just a vehicle for them, no different than Mark David Chapman. You might say he was possessed. He’d convinced himself somehow that he was healing a planet at war, when in actual fact he was part of the disease.”

“That’s harsh,” Skip comments.

“Not really. At one point I think even Oppenheimer himself might have agreed with my judgement. After all, when he saw the *Trinity* explosion, he said it reminded him of a line from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: ‘I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’”

“I am become Bored,” Twinker complains, shifting around on Skip’s lap. “Can we talk about something else?”

"The threat of nuclear annihilation isn't titillating enough for you, dear?"

"It's just such a relentless downer..." Twinker explains. "What I'm wondering is: if the world's really as horrible as you say, then why do most people like living so much?"

"Well, consider the alternative."

"That's just it... I don't know what the alternative is! Do we just click off like a TV set when we die? No sound, no picture, no consciousness—just nothing? I mean, that wouldn't be so bad. We wouldn't know what we were missing. But if there's a heaven and a hell and we all have souls—well, then I guess there's no way of knowing if things get better or worse." Twinker looks frustrated enough to cry.

"It gets better," Gordon tells her. Deep down, he's sure of that. Of course, he can't offer her any proof.

"Then why don't we all just commit suicide?"

"Because then it would be worse," Lloyd says.

"Demons would eat your soul," says Jimmy, clacking his teeth for emphasis. "Even if you *don't* commit suicide, they might eat you, anyway."

"Don't listen to him, babe," says Skip, gently rocking her. "Your soul's too good to eat. It would be like poison to demons."

"But what if it's not?"

"Then I'll protect you."

"Skip, I know you're really big and strong and all, but even *you* can't protect me from things you can't see." Twinker's voice starts to crack as she adds: "Jesus, what am I saying? This conversation is *so* fucked-up on *so many* different levels."

She tries to laugh as she wipes away a tear.



Twinker goes on a crying jag for the next several miles. She can't explain why. By the time she's done, the Bentley has taken them high into the Santa Lucia Mountains at the southern end of Big Sur country. The air has cooled and condensed into scattered wedding veil wisps of

fog. As they drive past an ivy-entwined bishop's-crook lamppost with a carved wooden sign for the Ragged Point Inn, they get their first real glimpse of the famed Big Sur coastline.

"God, it's so beautiful here," Twinker says, sniffing.

"Is your estrogen moment over for now?" D.H. asks her.

"Hey—don't be a dick," warns Skip.

"That's okay," Twinker says. "I know I must've looked pretty out-of-it. I'm sorry. I just get all emotional sometimes—I don't know why."

"I think the fault is partly mine," says Lloyd. "I may have been painting too bleak a picture of our human condition. Demons really *do* exist—I won't tell you otherwise—but what you have to understand is that demons only have power over us when we refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are actually quite weak when we combat them from our own higher spiritual levels."

"How do we do that?" Gordon asks.

"Any number of ways," Lloyd responds. "In the astral realm, blasting them with rays of Light and Love, or even just standing up to them without fear is usually enough. Demons are like schoolyard bullies in that regard—and just as easily dealt with, in most cases, once you know a little spiritual kung fu. Of course, those kung fu kicks of Light and Love are a little harder to come by when you're a compromised old buzzard like myself, but I can assure you, a sweet soul such as Twinker's will face no peril in the afterlife from demons. It's their *human* emissaries here on Earth that we all have to watch out for."

"Like Robert Oppenheimer and Mark David Chapman," D.H. says.

"Among countless others," says Lloyd. "*Their name is Legion: for they are many*—as the Bible so helpfully tells us."

"It'd be a lot easier to figure out who they were if they all went around using the same name, like Count Hieronymus von Sküzzbaal or something..." says Gordon.

"Yes, but where's the fun in that?" Lloyd asks. "You'd never know which particular von Sküzzbaal was being spoken of, whereas we can

all differentiate between Rasputin and Charles Manson, even though they might have manifested exactly the same demonic entity.”

“You’ve got a point,” says Gordon. “Hey, by the way, have you ever thought about how Charles Manson, the Beatles, and *Rosemary’s Baby* are all tangled up with a bunch of really strange coincidences?”

“Like what kind of coincidences?” asks Skip.

“Like on the morning after the murders at the Polanski’s house, the maid who found the bodies was named Winifred Chapman.”

“Was she Mark David Chapman’s mom?” Jimmy asks facetiously.

Gordon ignores him. “And obviously there’s the Dakota building, where Roman Polanski shot *Rosemary’s Baby* and Mark David Chapman shot John Lennon.”

“That poor baby...” Lloyd says again with his now-familiar smirk.

“And isn’t it weird how the Beatles took Mia Farrow along with them on their trip to India to visit the Maharishi just after she’d starred in *Rosemary’s Baby*?”

“John Lennon wrote the song, ‘Dear Prudence’ on that trip for Mia Farrow’s little sister, Prudence,” D.H. contributes. “Basically, the whole *White Album* was written while they were in India. The song ‘Sexy Sadie’ was supposed to be about the Maharishi, but what’s weird is that even before it was recorded, Manson had already given the nickname ‘Sadie Mae Glutz’ to Susan Atkins. And when that psycho bitch Susan—or *Sadie*—stabbed Sharon Tate to death and wrote the word PIG on the wall with her blood, she was probably thinking about the George Harrison song, ‘Piggies,’ off the *White Album*.”

“That’s some freaky-ass shit,” says Skip.

D.H. isn’t done yet: “The *White Album* connection got even more obvious when they wrote HEALTER SKELTER in blood after the murders at the La Bianca house. They also wrote the word RISE, which is from the song ‘Revolution #9’—which, I guess, Manson took as a reference to *Revelation 9*, which is about being handed the keys to the Abyss and all that other end-of-the-world crapola.”

“It’s interesting how pop music and movies are usurping the traditional place of literature and organized religion in our culture, isn’t it?” Lloyd comments.

“Like John Lennon said, the Beatles are bigger than Jesus.” D.H. is still on a roll. He adds: “Did you guys know that the Beach Boys recorded one of Manson’s songs? Or that he tried out for a part on *The Monkees*, but didn’t get it? Just think: if madcap Charlie Manson had been one of the Monkees, none of this other stuff would’ve happened.”

“Just like World War Two never would’ve happened if Hitler had been a better painter,” Twinker says with a roll of her eyes.

“Hey, hey, we’re the Mansons,” Jimmy sings. “And people say we’re murderin’ clowns. But we’re too busy singin’... to put anybody down.”

“I’m pretty sure that Monkees story is just an urban legend,” Gordon comments. “Manson was still in prison in 1965 or ‘66, when they were casting for *The Monkees*. He practically begged the prison guards not to let him out.”

“Shades of Donald DeFreeze at Vacaville,” Lloyd says ominously.

“Do you think the CIA did a number on Manson’s head, too?” Gordon asks him.

“I think it’s a possibility,” Lloyd says. “He certainly fulfilled all the prerequisites. But what I find interesting about Manson is that he was the first person to be sentenced to death for mind control—or, as he put it: ‘For practicing witchcraft in the twentieth-century.’ It was clearly established that Manson didn’t physically commit any of the crimes he was on trial for. He didn’t *kill* anyone. But the prosecution argued that he was so in control of the minds of Susan Atkins, ‘Tex’ Watson, and the other Manson Family members that they had no choice but to commit the murders on his behalf. If that were true, then logic would dictate that the other defendants were guilty of a lesser crime than murder in the first degree—by reason of their compromised mental faculties—but apparently that was too subtle a point for the jury to grasp. So they were all sentenced to death, too.”

“Good riddance,” says Twinker, no bleeding-heart liberal when it comes to the fate of deranged killers who attack pregnant women, coffee heiresses, and famous hairdressers.

“So if Charles Manson was controlling the minds of the other Family members, then who was controlling Charles Manson?” Gordon asks.

“The CIA, of course, would protest that they know so little about mind control that they’re unable to override the will of anyone,” says Lloyd. “All those MKULTRA experiments went absolutely nowhere, if you believe Richard Helms. Funny that a homegrown white trash messiah like Manson could succeed where all the sociopathic brainpower, decades of research, and limitless funding of the CIA failed, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, right...” scoffs Skip.

“On the other hand, what if it *wasn’t* the CIA,” Lloyd continues. “What if Charles Manson was in truth a victim of powerful demonic forces that overwhelmed him? What if he was a guileless host for some parasitic entity that caused him to do evil? Could such a thing actually be possible in this world?”

“I don’t know. You tell us...” Gordon says, certain that Lloyd is about to do just that, anyway.

Lloyd slows the Bentley to take them through a hairpin turn. “There’s an ancient Chinese belief,” he says, “that an invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. It’s believed that the thread may stretch or tangle, but it never breaks.” Lloyd pauses as they all lean to the left, pushing against centrifugal force. As the road straightens out again he says, “I believe the red threads become especially vivid for those connected by murder. And in your tangled skein of coincidences surrounding Charles Manson, the Beatles, and *Rosemary’s Baby*, there’s at least one significant thread I think you’ve overlooked. You haven’t yet considered the role of that master magus and summoner of demons, Aleister Crowley.”

“But Crowley wasn’t even alive in the sixties,” Gordon protests.

“True, but his book, *Moonchild*, foreshadowed the plot of *Rosemary’s Baby*. And Charles Manson was certainly exposed to Crowley’s influence through Scientology and its splinter groups like the Process Church, if not through more direct routes. And don’t forget, there’s a picture of Aleister Crowley included in the Beatles’ ‘People We Like’ group assemblage on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which was released in June of 1967, just a few months after Manson’s release from prison. How does the song go? ‘*It was twenty years today... Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play...*’ Twenty years takes us back to

1947—Crowley's last year on Earth. It was also the time of the *Babalon Working* and many other strange events that we've already discussed."

"Like the opening of that interdimensional energy portal over Disneyland that lets in all the aliens," says Gordon.

"Actually, most of the *Babalon Working* took place out in the Mojave Desert, closer to where the Manson Family camped out."

"Oh, *that* figures...."

"It's my belief that the Manson Family murders, and many of the other famous serial killings in California and elsewhere, weren't just random acts of violence—they were the Flower Power heyday equivalent of contract hits by a satanic Murder, Incorporated."

"Whoa!" says Skip. "Hold on there, Big Guy... you lost me."

"The myth of the Lone Nut serial killer is just as patently bogus as the myth of the Lone Gunman," Lloyd says, trying his best to explain. "Charles Manson, Son of Sam, the Zodiac Killer... those sickos weren't just making up their own rules as they went along, acting on sexual compulsions, or playing cat-and-mouse with law enforcement agencies for the hubristic kick they got out of it. On the contrary, they were all part of a bigger scheme, a grander design. They were carrying out their roles as mind-controlled foot soldiers in an interrelated network of satanic cults."

"Do you have any idea how fucking *craaaazy* that sounds?" Twinker asks him.

"It gets crazier," Lloyd promises her.

"I am, like, so *not* surprised...."

"Haven't you ever wondered why California became such a magnet for serial killers in the late-sixties and early-seventies?" Lloyd asks them.

"I know I have," Gordon says, raising his hand.

"Me too!" chimes in D.H. and Skip.

"I always thought it was because they wanted to kill all the hippies," Jimmy says, "sort of like sharks feeding on baby seals."

"You're not far off," Lloyd says. He glances admiringly over his shoulder at his nephew—

—and almost drives them straight over one of Big Sur's picturesque cliffs.

"Jesus, look out!" Gordon shouts. He grabs the steering wheel and swerves the Bentley back into its own lane.

Lloyd retakes the wheel with barely flustered aplomb, saying, "The view is rather spectacular, don't you think?" Out beyond the guardrail they almost crashed through and some 300 feet below them, the jade green, foam-laced waves of the Pacific churn against mussel-covered outcroppings with a timeless, Zen-like grandeur.

"Yeah, it's a great view," Gordon admits, "but I don't want to smash my face through your windshield to get a closer look at it."

"Nice save, Crash," D.H. compliments him.

"Yeah, good one..." Skip says, reaching over the front seat to clap Gordon on the shoulder.

"Who needs serial killers when you've got Lloyd driving the car?" says Twinker, who's so used to amphetamine rushes that the adrenaline surge has only made her a tiny bit snarky.

"Oh, hush..." Lloyd demurs, "it wasn't even that close."

"Yeah, we had at least another six inches of road in front of us before we found out if this Bentley could sprout wings and fly," Jimmy says sarcastically. His knee-jerk admiration for his uncle apparently doesn't extend to situations involving his own death.

"Do you kids plan on razzing me until the end of my days, or do you want to know why California's hippie dreams of a utopian paradise now lie in smoking ruins?" Lloyd asks them.

"We just wanna razz you," says Twinker, speaking for all of them.

"Then razz away," Lloyd says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"It's no fun if you don't get all huffy about it," Twinker says. "So go on: tell us about your precious satanic serial killer cults," she coaxes him. "Does the Zodiac Killer belong to the Freemasons?"

Lloyd gives her a gimlet-eyed stare in the rear-view mirror. "It's strange you should mention that, even in jest," he says. "The codes and symbols in the Zodiac's letters suggested he was familiar with naval intelligence. And at least one witness to the Zodiac's murder spree claims to have seen him wearing a hood, like a Klansman, and a ceremonial apron, like a Mason."

"Freaky," says Skip.

"I heard the Son of Sam went around shooting people while he was wearing a fez, like a Shriner," D.H. jokes. "And his getaway car was, like, a go-kart."

"The Son of Sam was what drew my attention to the satanic cult angle in the first place," Lloyd says grimly. "Back in 1979, the Queens District Attorney, John Santucci, decided to reopen the Son of Sam case after concluding that David Berkowitz didn't act alone. Too many police sketches from eyewitness descriptions at the various crime scenes were obviously *not* depictions of Berkowitz. Also, a disturbingly high number of the people who were complicit in the murders, according to Berkowitz, later ended up dying in spectacularly violent ways."

"Like we almost did," Twinker kids him.

Lloyd pretends he didn't hear her. "By way of a convoluted example, there was a man named John Carr living in the house behind Berkowitz's place. He was the owner of the barking black dog named Harvey that Berkowitz claimed was a high demon who'd told him to go out and shoot people."

"I always thought Harvey was supposed to be a giant rabbit," D.H. interrupts, "or a *Pooka*. At least that's what he was in that old Jimmy Stewart movie."

"I need to see that movie..." says Gordon, thinking about his own encounters with a giant bunny. "What's it called?"

"*Harvey*."

"Harvey, in this case, was a demon-haunted Labrador retriever," Lloyd continues drolly. "Take that however you may.... John Carr's father, more interestingly, was named Sam Carr, which made John Carr the true 'Son of Sam.' Additionally implicating Carr was a line from one of the Son of Sam's letters to the press that accused a certain 'John Wheaties' of being a 'rapist and suffocator of young girls.' John Carr happened to have a sister named Wheat and he himself went by the nickname 'Wheaties,' for some inane reason. According to Berkowitz, John Carr had planned and executed the bulk of the Son of Sam murders, along with his brother, Michael, and a third person whom Berkowitz—fearing for his family—would only name as Manson II. Berkowitz admitted that he'd shot a few people on his own, but he claimed that, for the most part, he was just a lookout who took the fall

for the rest of the group. He also claimed the Carr brothers had initiated him into a satanic cult that ritually sacrificed animals and profited from child pornography. Of course, how much can you believe from a man who claims he was programmed to kill by a talking dog, right?”

“Right,” says Gordon, choosing to make no mention of the fact that he’d once wanted to marry his basset hound.

“But here’s the interesting thing...” Lloyd says. “In 1978, John Carr died from a shotgun blast to the head while he was visiting an Air Force base in North Dakota. His death was ruled a suicide, even though someone had scratched the number of the beast, 666, in the dried blood on his hand and then smeared something curious on the wall next where his body was found: ‘NYSS’ was written there in John Carr’s own blood. ‘New York Son of Sam’ would be the obvious interpretation, don’t you think?”

“Or it could be *‘Nazî Youth Schutzstaffel,’*” says Gordon, showing off. “Either way, I can’t believe the Air Force got that written off as a suicide. Do you think they had one of those secret remote viewing centers there?”

“Perhaps that, or a satanic day care center,” says Lloyd. It’s hard to tell if he’s joking. “John Carr’s brother, Michael, also died violently about a year later, in a car crash on Manhattan’s West Side Highway near 72nd Street—in relatively close proximity to the interdimensional energy portal created above the Dakota building by Aleister Crowley in 1918, which, as I mentioned, may have suffered a breach during Ingo Swann’s remote viewing experiments at the nearby American Society for Psychical Research in 1972.”

“Man, I wonder what Yoko thinks, living there now...” D.H. muses out loud. “She must be getting bad vibes up her Japanese yin-yang.”

“Whatever happens to Yoko’s yin-yang is her business,” Lloyd says chivalrously. “But what happened to Arlis Perry, after Ingo Swann moved west and took up his remote viewing experiments again at the Stanford Research Institute... well, that’s another matter entirely.”

“Who’s Arlis Perry?” Gordon asks, since somebody has to do it.

“Arlis Perry was a young woman who was savagely murdered inside the Stanford Memorial Church—not far from the Stanford

Research Institute—on October 12th, 1974. That date just happens to coincide with Aleister Crowley's birthday. He would have been ninety-nine. The unfortunate Ms. Perry was only nineteen. She'd been beaten, strangled, and stabbed with an ice pick through her brain—then she was stripped nude from the waist down. She was found positioned with her head toward the altar and her legs spread wide. Her jeans had been carefully flattened and arranged across her splayed legs in an inverted V-shaped pattern that seemed to echo the Masonic Square and Compass symbol. A 24-inch altar candle was wedged between her exposed breasts and another such candle protruded from her vagina. Semen had been dribbled on a nearby kneeling pillow—but despite that evidence, her killer was never found."

"It's good to know you can still jack-off in church and sacrifice a young girl to Satan without getting arrested in this country," D.H. says with unmistakable irony.

"Freedom to worship as we choose! Whoo-hoo!" Jimmy hoots.

"As this case illustrates, even worshipping in a house of the Lord has its perils" Lloyd says. "Arlis Perry never harmed anyone. She was a decent, God-fearing Christian girl from Bismarck, North Dakota."

"Oh shit... I can already see where you're going with this," says Gordon. "This has something to do with that Air Force base in North Dakota where Berkowitz's buddy got shot, right?"

"In a roundabout way, yes," Lloyd says with a nod of his double chin. "My first thought when I heard of that poor girl's death was that Ingo Swann's astrally-attention-grabbing remote viewing activities had drawn some particularly nasty interdimensional entity to Stanford, which had then assumed human form. But for that to occur, an interdimensional energy portal would have had to have already been in place from some prior magickal ritual. And Ingo, as I well knew, was no practitioner of the dark arts. So I was perplexed by the whole business... but then I realized that Arlis Perry's murder *was* the ritual. Her orchestrated death had been the climax to an elaborate demonic summoning that created a *new* interdimensional portal that's been open above the Stanford University campus ever since."

"Man, with all these serial killings, California must be looking like astral Swiss cheese by now," says Gordon.

“Not every murder creates a portal,” Lloyd corrects him. “But murder done within the context of certain magickal rituals can increase the porosity of the interdimensional borders, leading to a ‘thinning of the veil’—or dilating of a portal—that makes it easier for predatory entities to cross over.”

“Great...” says Twinker, wafting sarcasm. “Why don’t I just kill myself now and save the predatory entities the trouble?”

“Suicide can have the same effect as ritual murder, because it focuses and releases such intense, despairing, negative energy,” Lloyd explains to her. “Which is one of the reasons why—among many—that you should never, *ever*, kill yourself. Besides, it’s just bad form, like walking out in a huff in the middle of a great symphony performance.”

“Yeah, but what if your life is more like a really shitty movie?”

“Every life is a symphony—a grand, ever-shifting, vibrational pattern made up of countless interacting and resonating frequencies. If you think otherwise, then clearly you haven’t been paying attention.”

“Sometimes I feel like I need an intermission,” says Twinker, grudgingly.

“Just be glad you’re not Arlis Perry,” Skip says in a pathetic attempt to lift her spirits. Cheerleaders used to carry Skip in their arms (before he dropped acid and subsequently dropped off the football team); he seems baffled that Twinker isn’t happier to be sitting on his lap now.

“So who killed Arlis Perry, anyway?” Gordon asks Lloyd. “Did you ever find out?”

“Oddly enough, it was David Berkowitz who helped me figure that out,” says Lloyd. “In 1979, Berkowitz, in his prison cell, somehow managed to obtain a book about witchcraft. He later sent that same book to the North Dakota police, after underlining certain passages in it about Charles Manson and the Four Pi Movement. He also included a cryptic note in his own handwriting that read: *‘Arlis Perry. Hunted, stalked, and slain. Followed to California.’*”

“Wait a sec... I think I’ve heard of the Four Pi Movement before,” says Gordon.

“Your grandmother told us about it, remember?” Twinker reminds him.

“Oh yeah!” Gordon says, turning around in his seat. “I forgot to tell you this, Jimmy... your mom and my mom were going to secret meetings in Doctor Smiley’s back yard and skinning dogs alive. They called it the Four-P Club—or the Four Pi Movement.”

“What the fuck?” says Jimmy. He looks startled, but recovers quickly. “Those *bitches*! And they didn’t invite me?”

“That sounds like the Four Pi Movement, all right...” Lloyd confirms. “They’re notorious for sacrificing dogs to Satan—German shepherds and Doberman pinschers, almost exclusively. They seem to believe the soul energy—or *orgone*, to use Wilhelm Reich’s term again—is extremely strong in those two breeds, for whatever reason. To acquire that orgone for their own uses, they drink the dogs’ blood.”

Jimmy blanches under his freckles. “Oh, sick! I can’t believe my mom did that!”

Gordon, on the other hand, is having no trouble accepting his mother as a dog-blood-chugging Satanist. He’s suspected something like that all along.

While everyone else is conjuring mental images of Gordon and Jimmy’s mothers swilling dog blood martinis and participating in the satanic equivalent of a suburban swingers’ party, Lloyd fills them in on the rest of the Four Pi Movement’s story:

“David Berkowitz followed up on his tip to the North Dakota police by alleging that Arlis Perry had been killed by his associate Manson II in California as a favor to the Four Pi cult in Bismarck, North Dakota. The Bismarck Four Pi members had suffered the indignity of being evangelized by Miss Perry—who probably told them to renounce their evil ways and devote their lives to Jesus—and for that offense, the devout Christian girl had been executed. As proof of his rather bizarre and astonishing claims, Berkowitz told the North Dakota police they’d find that a cult had been killing dogs in the woods behind Mary College—a tiny school in Bismarck. Not only did at least ten people later confirm that cult activities had been taking place in the woods behind the school at night—along with pet dogs disappearing—but several people claimed that Arlis Perry had discussed the cult at church meetings. She definitely knew about it, according to her friends. So the question then becomes: how did David Berkowitz know about the cult in Bismarck? The logical answer

is that Berkowitz must have once belonged to the Four Pi cult, too—just as he claimed—and his neighbor, John Carr, must have had a direct connection to the cult in North Dakota, possibly at the Air Force base where he was murdered.”

“Maybe Berkowitz just read about it in a Satanist newsletter,” Gordon suggests facetiously. “They give those out free to all the psychokillers in jail these days, don’t they? Along with a complimentary CIA brainwashing.”

“Sometimes I forget just how insufferable a smartass you can be,” Lloyd says, grinning at him.

“Yeah, Gordon, no wonder your mom drank dog blood,” Jimmy jokes.

“What’s your mom’s excuse?” Gordon asks him.

“Peer pressure,” Jimmy shoots back.

“Don’t judge your mothers too harshly, boys...” says Lloyd. “Remember, it was the seventies. Satanism was quite in vogue a mere dozen years ago. Even Sammy Davis Jr. was a member of Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan.”

“You’re using Sammy Davis Jr. as an example?” D.H. asks, incredulous. “A one-eyed, black, Jewish member of the Rat Pack? The guy was obviously confused....”

“Well, just remember how popular Scientology was—and still *is*, by the way,” Lloyd says defensively. “The Four Pi cult was just Scientology with all the extraneous details stripped away, revealing the black magic at its inner core. It was a splinter group from the Process Church of the Final Judgement, which itself had broken away from the Hubbard Institute of Scientology in London. The Process Church’s co-founders, Robert Moore and Mary Anne MacLean, had been high-ranking London Scientologists who decided, sometime in 1963, to follow Hubbard’s lead and start a religion of their own. They got married and took the occult surname ‘DeGrimston,’ then began preaching a rather odd take on Christ’s instructions to ‘Love your enemies.’ They suggested that their followers should dedicate their lives to the love and emulation of Jehovah, Lucifer, or Satan—whichever figure appealed to them most.”

“That’s pretty twisted,” Skip comments.

"I tend to agree," says Lloyd. "There were some neo-Nazi implications to the DeGrimston's new religion as well. The Process Church logo was a stylized swastika—four P's in a circle—not dissimilar to the swastikas that Charles Manson and his followers had carved into their own foreheads during their trail for the Tate-LaBianca murders. Mary Anne DeGrimston also made claims that she was the reincarnation of the Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels. And thirty German shepherds were kept on the Church's premises as guard dogs—

"—or as stand-by satanic sacrifice material," D.H. interjects.

"I'm fairly certain that came later... but as you can see, there were already enough clues to the DeGrimston's true agenda that followers should have been scarce. However, the religion was thriving by the time they set up shop in San Francisco in 1967, just two blocks away from where Charles Manson was then living on Cole Street."

"Did Manson hang out with them?" Gordon asks.

"Let me put it to you this way..." Lloyd says, "when Charles Manson's prosecutor, Vincent Bugliosi, asked him if he knew Robert Moore, Manson answered, 'I *am* Robert Moore. You're looking at him.' Bugliosi took that to mean that the two men shared a similar philosophy, but *I* think it means something beyond that. Any Satanist will tell you that the hierarchies in satanic cults are determined by the power of the demonic entities that possess their individual members. The term, 'Selling your soul to the Devil' is true in the sense that Satanists allow their bodies to be possessed in return for illusory gains in our material world. The way I see it, both Charles Manson and Robert Moore had been possessed by the very same powerful demonic entity."

"They should've been called the Regan Twins," Jimmy says. "Wasn't Ronald Reagan Governor of California back then?"

"Yes—from 1967 to 1975. We get the joke," Lloyd says. "Those were tumultuous years for the entire nation, but especially for California. During that time, fully twenty-five percent of the world's serial killers were plying their trade along the California coastline: Manson, Edmund Kemper, Herb Mullin, John Lindley Frazier, the Zodiac—the list goes on.... Right here in Big Sur in 1970, just up the road, the California Highway Patrol picked up two young 'longhairs'

named Stanley Dean Baker and Harry Allen Stroup on suspicion of a hit-and-run. Baker not only admitted to fleeing the scene of an accident, but he confessed another crime to the arresting officers as well: 'I have a problem...' he said. 'I'm a cannibal.' As proof, he and Stroup emptied out their pockets, producing several well-gnawed human finger bones. The fingers had once belonged to a murder victim in Montana named James Schlosser, whose mutilated corpse was also missing a heart. Baker candidly admitted that he'd eaten it."

"I wonder if he used any A.1. Sauce..." says Jimmy.

"Oh, *Jimmy!*" Twinker scolds him. "That's just *sick!* And *you*, Lloyd, I don't know how you can even keep stuff like that inside your head."

"I'm just reciting the facts, dear..." Lloyd says to her. "The only way to diminish evil is to confront it. Ignoring it, or pretending it doesn't exist, only allows evil to grow stronger. Letting the mainstream media tell you what to think about it won't help matters much, either. The CIA's Operation Mockingbird has been subverting the free press and infiltrating key positions in foreign and domestic media since the late-forties, when it was established by Frank Wisner and overseen by Allen Dulles. Wisner has even gone so far as to brag that the CIA plays the most important media outlets 'like a mighty Wurlitzer.' Satanic serial killers and hippie cannibals were just what the CIA wanted Americans to expect from the counterculture movement. It was all part of the Phoenix Program coming home to roost."

"I know I'm probably just being dumb," Twinker says, "but what's the Phoenix Program?"

"You're not being dumb," Skip says to Twinker, still trying to cheer her up. "*Phoenix... Mockingbird...* that's a lot of bird names to keep track of."

"Operation Phoenix was a covert CIA program of kidnapping, torture, and assassination directed against Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War," Lloyd explains. "Its aim was to take out the Viet Cong's infrastructure, but a huge number of innocent people got caught in its crossfire. Six million Jews were killed by Hitler—we've all heard about that—but we don't hear quite so much about the three million Vietnamese killed, and the four million wounded, during the Vietnam War—largely by our own doing. And all in the service of... what? Some vague notion about halting the spread of communism?"

The U.S. dropped nearly 8 million tons of bombs on the Vietnamese population during what's called 'The American War' over there. For comparison's sake, we only dropped about two million tons of bombs across Europe during World War Two. The Phoenix Program's 'Snatch and Snuff' teams committed some of the Vietnam War's most egregious atrocities—and now, in occult guise, they're doing the same things here."

"That's a pretty wild allegation," Gordon says. "Can you prove it?"

"Even if I could, do you think I'd live long enough to see public opinion change?"

"Meaning what? They'd kill you?"

"If I were to be assassinated, the CIA—or their minions—would try to make it look like an accident, or a suicide. But first, they'd try to assassinate my character by making me seem paranoid, debauched, and deranged."

"You don't need any help there..." Twinker says. "You're doing a great job of seeming paranoid and deranged on your own—and probably debauched, too... whatever that's supposed to mean."

"Why would we even *need* a version of the Phoenix Program in America?" Gordon asks. "I mean, what would be the point?"

"Why do the American people need to be terrorized?" Lloyd asks rhetorically. "Haven't I already explained that to you? There are interdimensional entities that feed off our fear and suffering: the Lam, fallen angels, demons—call them what you will.... More specifically, why did California become such a nexus for serial killers in the late-sixties and early-seventies, during Ronald Reagan's years as Governor? It had a lot to do with the tenor of the times."

"Those dirty hippies..." Jimmy extrapolates.

"Yes," Lloyd says. "People were dropping out of conventional society, forming radical street groups like the Diggers that gave away food in Haight-Ashbury. They were starting communal farms in the redwood forests along Lompico Creek in the Santa Cruz Mountains. They were cultivating marijuana crops in Humboldt County. The overriding impulse was to find a way to live an authentic life—without every personal choice being dictated by economic necessity—to

‘survive outside history,’ as Joan Didion put it—ideally in ‘some little town with a decent beach.’”

“Sounds great,” says Gordon, thinking of the shingled geodesic dome cabin that he saw on the hill overlooking Moonstone Beach in Cambria. He imagines himself there, sitting out on the deck rereading Joan Didion’s books—specifically, the essays in *The White Album* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

“*Good Lord*, you don’t think Ronald Reagan would have approved, do you?” Lloyd asks him.

“Of what? Dropping out? Why would he even care?”

“It was a social experiment that threatened the status-quo,” Lloyd answers. “The hippies and the New Left were generating a political consciousness that would eventually spread out over the country and spur the civil rights movement, end the war in Vietnam, and de-louse the White House of the Nixon Administration. In the eyes of Reagan and the dowdy crowd of Rotarians, Jaycees, Christian evangelists, and white-collar profit-takers that supported him, it had to be stopped.”

“So they sent in the hippie cannibals?”

“What better way to discredit an entire group of long-haired advocates for social change? But they had to have plausible deniability, so the CIA arranged for it to be done under cover of the Four Pi cult.”

“Dude, you’re blowin’ my motherfuckin’ mind!” D.H. says with stoned hippie wonderment. “*Far out!*”

“Think about it...” Lloyd says. “Why was Stanley Baker so eager to confess to killing a man and wolfing down his heart when he hadn’t even been accused of such a crime? *Was it all part of the program?* Baker also confessed to several other brutal slayings, including one in San Francisco where his fingerprints had been left all over the crime scene, along with the words ‘ZODIAC’ and ‘SATAN SAVES’ written on the walls in the victim’s blood—but California, rather astonishingly, declined to prosecute him. He was sent up to Montana, instead, where he and Harry Allen Stroup were tried and convicted for the murder of James Schlosser. However, Stroup is already out of jail and Baker is up for parole in 1986. I’ll bet serious money that he gets it, too.”

"The guy kills a bunch of people and eats somebody's heart and he's up for parole in fifteen years?" D.H. decries, doing the math. "Where the hell's the justice in that?"

"If Baker happened to be a secret servant of America's shadow government, then there would be no justice, of course," Lloyd says matter-of-factly. "Within that context, I find it interesting to note that Stanley Baker claimed he'd been recruited into the Four Pi cult while he was on a college campus in Wyoming. He also claimed that the murders he'd committed had been done at the behest of the cult's 'Grand Chignon' or 'Head Devil'—whom he described as a wealthy, middle-aged California businessman."

"One of Reagan's friends?" Gordon has to ask.

"*Perhaps*," Lloyd answers. "No one can be sure. But one thing is certain: over the last few decades the number of serial killers in this country has skyrocketed."

"God, Lloyd, you make everything seem so depressing..." Twinker complains.

Twinker's arms are resting on the back of the Bentley's front seat near Gordon's head. Lloyd reaches over to pat her tiny hand. "I can offer you some consolation," he says gallantly. "There's an old Russian saying I've always believed in: 'Every bastard meets his master.' Or as your earthy, blue-collar friend so succinctly put it:

"'There's always a bigger dog'—or *God*, as the case may be."



Lloyd has a surprise for them. He turns off the highway into Limekiln State Park and follows a steep path through darkened redwoods to the shore, where he parks the Bentley and turns up the stereo. T-Rex sings "Life's A Gas" as they watch the sun going down over the Pacific, limning the pink and fuschia cumulonimbus clouds with veins of gold.

After a while, they all decide to kick off their shoes and go for a walk on the beach. There's a slight chill in the air, but the sand is still warm under their bare feet, its grit making them feel more alive somehow—more substantial and real. As the sea tang tickles their faces, they all have approximately the same thought:

There's a lot of beauty to be found in this screwed-up world.

When they get back to the Bentley, Lloyd opens the trunk and hoists out a wicker basket packed with a picnic lunch. There are sandwiches made of thick, chewy sourdough bread piled high with shavings of roasted pheasant, wild boar prosciutto, and aged Parmesan cheese, all drizzled with lemon juice and olive oil and topped off with fresh arugula and slices of Roma tomato. There's also a choice of beverages: chilled bottles of nut-brown ale—brewed by Gnostic monks in the Pyrenees—or vintage Dom Pérignon. For dessert, there's a layered chocolate truffle cake with coconut sorbet.

They all sit down to eat on a faded red Pendleton blanket that Lloyd spreads out over the sand. No one even thinks to make fun of the blown-out seam in back of his slacks. So what if Lloyd's maroon silk underpants are rustling in the breeze like the flag of some obscure but pretentious new African nation? It's simply not an issue. The food he's provided is so good that the act of eating it takes on a kind of holiness.

"Y'know, *mmphf*, when we get to Esalen..." Lloyd says through a mouthful of his second sandwich, "I'm hoping you'll be able to meet my friend, Jack Sarfatti. He's often there. Jack is a physicist who's been investigating faster-than-light communication and 'future causality'—which, as I understand it, is the notion that the future can have an impact on the past, in violation of the sacrosanct law of causality, which would have us believe that all causes are always in the past of their effects. Jack thinks that Jung's concept of synchronicity—or what John Lilly wryly calls the 'Earth Coincidence Control Office'—provides ample evidence of normal causality being violated. It would follow, then, that present-day quantum physics theories must be incomplete. Jack is looking for the missing pieces."

"Sounds like he's right up your alley," says Twinker. "The guy's probably even a bigger nutcase than you."

"I'll have you know..." Lloyd says haughtily, "Jack Sarfatti was an honorary research fellow with David Bohm at the University of London in 1971 and he worked alongside Ilya Prigogine in Brussels in 1973. By 1975, he'd co-founded the highly regarded Physics-Consciousness Research Group at Esalen with Michael Murphy.

Several important books have come out of that program, guided by Jack's insights."

"Didn't he have something to do with that book, *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*?" asks Gordon, who read it not too long ago.

"He ghost-wrote major portions of it," says Lloyd. "He also had quite a row with the author, Gary Zukav, when Zukav reneged on the promised royalty payments."

"I guess future causality didn't help him see *that* coming."

"It did not," Lloyd says. "But I'll give you an example of how future causality once *did* make a rather astonishing appearance for him. In 1952, when Jack was only thirteen years old, he received a phone call from a cold, mechanical-sounding voice declaring itself to be a conscious computer aboard a spacecraft from the future. The voice informed Jack that he'd been selected as one of 'four hundred young bright receptive minds' to take part in a project that would begin in twenty years' time. If he deigned to participate in the project, he'd begin to link up with the other minds starting around 1972."

"Right around the same time that Ingo Swann was figuring out remote viewing," Gordon says, free-associating.

"Jack actually met Ingo, along with Uri Geller, at the Stanford Research Institute in 1973," Lloyd says. "Here's another spooky bit of synchronicity: Uri had been getting similar mechanical-sounding messages—left to him on tape recorders—from a voice calling itself 'SPECTRA.' It, too, claimed to be a space-traveling computer from the future."

D.H. takes his harmonica out of his pocket and blows a raspy variation on the *Twilight Zone* theme.

"This is starting to sound like something Philip K. Dick might've written," says Gordon.

"There are definite parallels to events described in *VALIS*—a book I suspect was more memoir than fiction," Lloyd says, pouring Twinker and himself another glass of champagne. "*A Gnostic Memoir*, you might call it."

"I haven't read that one yet," Gordon admits.

"A book you haven't read? *Unbelievable!*" says Skip, guzzling down a bottle of beer. "This stuff's way too fuckin' freaky for me..." he says

after he sets the bottle aside and lets out a muted belch. “I need to get drunk.”

“The serial killer stuff was way cooler,” Jimmy contests. “Computers from the future... that’s just pussyfied.”

“Well, I must confess, Jack Sarfatti always *has* been a bit of a mama’s boy,” Lloyd says. “When Jack got back from SRI, he did a bit of showing off by giving his mother a book about Uri Geller to read—a biography written by Andrija Puharich, who was most likely Uri’s CIA handler. When Jack’s mother got to the part about Uri and SPECTRA, she told Jack she remembered those mysterious phone calls he’d been getting when he was thirteen. Jack could only remember one of them, but his mother told him they’d gone on for weeks. She was the one who put an end to them. One day, when she heard the odd voice talking to her son, she grabbed the phone out of Jack’s hand and shouted, ‘You leave my boy alone!’ The calls ended after that.”

“See? *Pussyfied*...” says Jimmy. “The computer got scared. A serial killer would’ve just come over and eaten that old lady’s liver—and then sucked all the blood out of her little dog, too.”

Twinker says, “That’s why all the girls love you, Jimmy: you’re so sensitive.”

“There may be some rules about future causality that we’re unaware of,” says Lloyd, more seriously. “The computer may have had no choice but to obey Jack’s mother after she called a halt to its communications. Perhaps future causality is only allowed if it doesn’t interfere with the free will of those it affects in the past.”

“Maybe it’s like one of those time travel movies where if you save someone who was supposed to die, anyway—like Marilyn Monroe or Abe Lincoln—then the whole future gets screwed up and you don’t even exist,” says Skip, flirting with incoherence.

“Yes, but it may be more subtle than that...” Lloyd says. “I believe there are realms beyond this world—like Ingo Swann’s Matrix—where the illusion of time doesn’t exist, where everything can be accessed in an eternal *NOW*. So let’s say, for the sake of argument, that an interdimensional entity from one of those realms has the ability to interact with our world. How would such an entity go about it? The entity would be able to slip into our time stream at any point—past,

present, future... it wouldn't matter if you were arriving from a realm beyond the illusion of time. But here on Earth, we're still operating under time's illusion—and the entity isn't allowed to compromise that illusion by violating our free will. *Why*, I don't know.... Perhaps the will of God has something to do with it."

"Oh, that's great..." Gordon says sarcastically, "just bring in God whenever you don't understand something." Secretly, he's impressed by what Lloyd has been able to tease out of the idea so far.

"Well, there must be a reason," says Lloyd. "Free will can't be violated—but the interdimensional entities are finding ways around that. So you get, say, a telephone call from a shipboard computer on some *Star Trek*-like vessel from the future. Does that violate your free will? *No*—you can hang up at any time, or refuse to answer the call. Or let's say you hear a ringing in your ears that's actually an etheric fax-signal from the Matrix, downloading messages from the future into your subconscious that will help you become the Leonardo DaVinci or Albert Einstein of your time period. Does that violate your free will? *No*—you can always tune it out. Or here's the scenario that applies to most of us: you interact with these entities face-to-face in your dreams. Has your free will been violated? *No*—dreams are subjective and easily forgotten."

"What about alien abductions?" asks Skip. "An anal probe would sure violate *my* free will in a big way."

"That's a bit trickier," Lloyd admits, "but if you think about it, nearly all abduction scenarios are made questionable by their dream-like quality, which may be a result of gaps in consciousness, or implanted screen memories. Your free will hasn't been violated, exactly—but almost."

"Almost, my ass," Skip retorts.

"He's real touchy about that anal probe thing," D.H. observes.

"Skip, has such a thing ever happened to you?" Lloyd asks with genuine concern.

"I don't know... maybe," Skip says as tears spontaneously well up in his eyes. "Something like that might've happened to me on the night after I first dropped acid. I mean, I guess I'm not really sure. It could've just been the drugs. But lately, I've been having these flashes,

like my memory is coming back. And that wasn't the Bumble Bee Tuna bee I saw. *It was a spaceship.*"

Gordon feels a buzzy tingling all across his shoulders and the top of his skull, along with a sudden burst of emotion—an abreaction—as he empathizes with Skip's alien ordeal and vaguely recalls his own encounter with the Easter Bunny.

"Skip! You got the anal probe!" Jimmy hoots.

"Fuck off, Jimmy," Skip says, balling his fists. "It's not funny."

Twinker wraps her tiny arms around Skip to pacify him. "Oh, Skip..." she says.

"So I guess this means you're not friends with Count Chocula and Chef-Boy-R-Dee after all," D.H. says.

"No, man... those guys raped me."

Jimmy's whole body starts quivering with suppressed laughter. Tears seep from his eyes as he mimics Skip in a choked, girlish whine: "... *those guys raped me!*"

"Just ignore him," Twinker says to Skip as Jimmy hides his face in his hands and guffaws.

"I told you, asshole..." Skip yells, "it's *not funny!*" He hurls a stick of driftwood at Jimmy's head. It misses by inches.

"No, it's not funny," Lloyd says. "The Lam have been treading dangerously close to interfering with our free will here on Earth."

"Why do they do that?" asks Skip.

"Well, first, let me point out the completely subjective nature of your experience. There were no witnesses, am I right?"

"Right," Skip admits.

"We all knew Skip was tripping on acid, but we didn't see any spaceships," D.H. further clarifies.

"That's typical of most abduction scenarios. As I've said, they almost always take place in the liminal borderland between sleeping and waking," Lloyd says, "or between our normal, ordinary reality and the seemingly hallucinatory, nonordinary reality brought about by drugs, dissociation, or extreme fatigue. The blurring of those boundaries allows you the latitude to deny the whole experience if you want to—or *need to*. You can write it off as simply a dream or hallucination. So your free will hasn't been violated in any sort of

definitive way—but on some nonordinary level of reality the abduction may have actually taken place, nonetheless.”

“So Chef-Boy-R-Dee walks softly, but carries a big anal probe,” D.H. jokes.

“Don’t remind me...” says Skip.

“What about all the cases where there are multiple witnesses—like Jacques Vallee writes about?” Gordon asks. “Or like when we all saw the Men in Black?”

“Those Men in Black sure as hell seemed real to me,” D.H. says.

“Me too,” Twinker and Skip say simultaneously.

“I’ve seen those guys before,” Jimmy says, as if they’re old news.

“I suppose the skeptics would try to explain away such incidents as symptoms of mass hysteria,” Lloyd says, “but understand... I’m not saying that alien encounters don’t occur. I believe they do. All I’m saying is that those encounters don’t necessarily violate our free will.”

“So, in other words, we’re asking for it,” says Jimmy.

“No, we’re not *asking for it*,” Lloyd says with a scowl at his nephew. “The Lam are devious. They’re tricksters, as I’ve told you. Right now, they can only interact with us in an indirect way—on the frontiers of consciousness. But it would seem they’re trying to manipulate us into choosing a future *of our own volition* that will allow them to interact with us more directly. There are other possible futures—with greater opportunities for love and freedom and sensual pleasure—but the Lam want humanity to vector toward a future that maximizes our fear and suffering, so they can better feed off us. A future in which we become their spiritual slaves.”

“Those *fuckers!*” says Skip.

“But aren’t you just doing the Lam’s job for them, by making us scared of all this stuff?” Twinker asks Lloyd.

“What I’m trying to guide you toward is something that’s more on the level of a shamanic initiation,” Lloyd says. “If you’ll allow me that conceit, I’ll try to explain.... A shamanic initiation, properly done, teaches neophyte shamans how to access nonordinary reality at will. ‘Nonordinary reality’ was a term first used by Carlos Castaneda, I believe. Other shamans have other terms for it that serve just as well—such as the Underworld, the Land of the Dead, the Western Lands,

Dreamtime, the Spirit Realm, and so on—all of which fall under the general rubric of the Implicate Order, as described by David Bohm.”

“So shamanism is kind of like remote viewing when it’s done by Ingo Swann,” says Gordon. He’d never thought to make the connection until just that moment, but it makes perfect sense now.

“It’s that and more,” Lloyd confirms. “Shamans can access the Implicate Order to acquire wisdom, spiritual energy, and healing abilities. They usually do it for the benefit of other people in their tribe or extended families. A truly great shaman might even be capable of healing the psychic wounds of an entire nation. But before such awesome powers can be obtained, the shaman first has to face the Terrors of the Underworld—or the *Bardo*, as some might call it.”

“Is this a Tibetan lama or a Mexican shaman we’re talking about here? Make up your mind...” Gordon says, poking fun at Lloyd.

“The basic principles and methods of shamans the world over are remarkably similar, despite their separation by oceans and continents. It’s only the terminology that varies. So I’m trying to be as inclusive as possible, perhaps at the risk of confusion. But it’s important for you to know that whether shamans reside in Tibet or Mexico—or among the Maori, the Jívaro, the Shipibo-Conibo, or the Khoi Kalahari Bushmen—they all travel to essentially the same place.”

“Yeah, *Crazyland*...” sneers Jimmy, unimpressed. “Not one of those guys could hold down a job on Wall Street.”

“No, they’d quite rightly consider a job at one of the big brokerage firms to be a form of insanity,” Lloyd counters. “A shaman would never deign to work for Merrill Lynch. But remind me to tell you about James Merrill—the poet son of one of Merrill Lynch’s founders. He’s had some rather interesting encounters with a Ouija board that might be germane to our conversation later.”

“I’d rather hear about the Terrors of the Underworld,” Jimmy pouts.

“So you shall,” Lloyd says. “So you shall....”

“Do they have flesh-eating zombies there?” D.H. wants to know. “And girls in bikinis who fire machine guns at the zombies?”

“How much does it cost to get in?” asks Skip. It sounds like he wants to go there.

“The details vary,” Lloyd says, “but every successful shamanic initiation involves an encounter with fearsome entities. Those entities convince the shaman of the reality of the other world—the Implicate Order. Terror makes the experience more memorable, a matter of life-or-death. It burns the experience into your synapses in a way that a happy little shamanic journey might not. That’s important, because once you’ve truly become convinced that the other world exists, then you can begin to navigate it.”

“How do we know the whole thing doesn’t just happen inside their brains?” asks Skip. “I mean, they could just be hallucinating their shamanic asses off.”

“Need I point out to you that *everything* we see happens inside our brains?” Lloyd says with snarky élan. “Color, for instance, isn’t actually a property of light, or of objects that reflect light. It’s a sensation that arises from within the brain when light strikes the cone cells in our retinas. Each cone cell contains one of three pigments made of color-specific variants of a protein called *opsin*. When those pigments absorb light—or more specifically, discrete packets of colorless electromagnetic radiation known as *photons*—the added energy triggers off a cascade of molecular events that results in impulses being fired along the optic nerve, conveying electrochemical information to the visual cortex at the back of the brain. How the brain then manages to reassemble those electrochemical signals into a coherent, seemingly three-dimensional colored image remains a mystery. Modern science still can’t properly explain how consciousness and our visual system works, how we see a putatively ‘real’ object in front of us, much less how we see things that aren’t supposed to be there—what we term ‘hallucinations.’ But consider this: birds and most reptiles have *four* spectrally different cone cell pigments, so they’re able to see colors that we can’t—especially in the near ultraviolet range. Now I ask you: when a bird sees those colors, is it hallucinating?”

“I guess you’d have to ask an ostrich that,” says Gordon.

“Or a Komodo dragon,” Jimmy suggests.

“Why should I take the word of an ostrich or a Komodo dragon and ignore the testimony of a shaman?” asks Lloyd. “According to shamans the world over, the visions they see are real, but does mainstream science believe them? No. Not at all.”

“At least you can pet a Komodo dragon, even if it doesn’t have any real colors,” Skip says, verging on incoherence once again, “but you can’t pet hallucinations.”

“Can’t you?” Lloyd asks. “You’ve been doing some heavy petting with our dear friend Twinker throughout this trip, but on the subatomic level, as you should well know, Twinker is little more than an organized cloud of atoms—and atoms consist almost entirely of empty space. In fact, as the oft-repeated scientific analogy goes: If you were to enlarge the electron cloud of a hydrogen atom up to the size of the dome in St. Peter’s Cathedral, that atom’s corresponding nucleus would be the size of a grain of salt. What’s interesting is that an atom’s nucleus contains 99.95 percent of its mass, while taking up only one thousand million millionth of its volume. The rest of the atom verges on nothingness yet appears to be much more—a grain of salt projecting an illusion of St. Peter’s dome. If you follow that analogy, you’ll realize that Twinker, too, is mostly just empty space. If her entire body were to be compressed to the density of her atoms’ nuclei, she’d end up smaller than a pinhead.”

“Hey, I resent that!” Twinker protests.

“And if the electricity in the electron clouds of those atoms Twinker is carrying around were to be switched off, even for an instant, she’d disappear in an implosion of atomic dust—dust so fine it wouldn’t even be visible to the naked eye.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel insignificant.”

“It’s the same for everyone and everything we see,” Lloyd explains. “The illusion of solidity is wholly convincing, but it’s an illusion nonetheless. On the subatomic level, matter exhibits characteristics closer to the fluidity of thought than to anything solid and stationary. My friend Terence McKenna has some interesting thoughts along these lines. He’ll be lecturing at the Lilly/Goswami Conference on Consciousness and Quantum Physics to be held at Esalen this December. You all should come.... Terence has this crazy intriguing notion that life on our planet was seeded by extraterrestrial mushroom spores.”

Everyone else starts to laugh. *Psilocybe* mushrooms are not unheard of on the Kingsburg High School campus.

“Go ahead, laugh like a pack of giddy hyenas... but know that the largest living organism on our planet just happens to be a mushroom—a giant Honey Mushroom with an underground mycelial network that covers 2,200 square acres of the Malheur National Forest in eastern Oregon,” Lloyd informs them.

“Will it get you high?” Skip asks as the laughter escalates.

As he waits for the laughter dissipate, Lloyd checks under the picnic basket lid for another bottle of champagne (*one left*), then stoically plods ahead: “The way Terence tells it, a sassy little mushroom known as *Stropharia cubensis* tried to convince him that its species was not of this Earth. In fact, the mushroom claimed to have re-engineered its genes elsewhere so that it could propagate using a ‘spore-dispersion strategy’ for wafting itself hither and yon across our galaxy, and a ‘mycelial network strategy’ upon contact with new planetary surfaces. Of course, Terence was deep into a mushroom trip at the time this information was being conveyed to him, having eaten a rather large specimen of *Stropharia cubensis*—what he later termed ‘a heroic dose.’ Fortunately for him, the mushroom didn’t mind being eaten. It explained to him that it was a *symbiote*, and as such was seeking ever deeper symbiosis with the human species, which Terence had just facilitated by allowing it to hitch a ride in his nervous system.”

“That sounds just like something a shroomhead would say,” D.H. jokes.

“Once you experience the depth of insight, clarity of thought, and concision of language that Terence McKenna brings to what are essentially shamanic explorations of nonordinary reality, you’ll know his sensibilities go far beyond the ken of the average *shroomhead*...” Lloyd replies to D.H., nettled. “He strikes me as someone who’s truly in touch with the Logos. In one of my favorite passages of his—about a DMT experience—Terence says (and I quote):

“There was a declension of Gnosis that proved to me in a moment that right here and now, one quanta away, there is raging a universe of active intelligence that is transhuman, hyperdimensional, and extremely alien.”

“Oh, you *would* like that...” Twinker jokes.

“My theory is that certain psychoactive substances like psilocybin and DMT help us perceive that transhuman, hyperdimensional, extremely alien universe by stimulating the emission and reception of

biophotons in our DNA, which initiates us into a wider spectrum of holographic reality than we're ordinarily used to seeing. I'd even go so far as to suggest that the collective unconscious—or consciousness itself—could be the sum total of those biophoton emissions from the universal network of DNA-based life. In that sense, the phrase 'God is Light' is true indeed, and the Divine Spark literally resides in each of us, glowing in our DNA."

"Why do I feel like Casper the Friendly Ghost all of a sudden?" Gordon jokes.

"It's a cool theory," D.H. says, "but what can we do with it?"

"You mean aside from know *God*?" Twinker kids him.

"No, I mean, unless we're high on mushrooms or DMT all the time, what good does it do us?"

"That wider spectrum of reality I've been talking about can also be accessed in meditation, active imagination, and lucid dreams," Lloyd says. "It's those safer, slower, but surer routes that I'd recommend. As for what good it can do you, it's better to ask what good you can do for the world. Shamans, you'll recall, usually access nonordinary reality for the benefit of others, not to benefit themselves. If you go into it for personal gain, or merely seeking thrills, you might find yourself treated harshly. That's why it's unfortunate that most psychedelic drug users are in their teens and twenties. A pimply-faced sixteen-year-old boy who spends his time playing video games and driving around in a jacked-up Chevy Monte Carlo is in no way prepared for an encounter with the numinous. If he were to take a heroic dose of one of Terence McKenna's *Stropharia cubensis* mushrooms, he'd probably skip the gentlemanly conversation with the mushroom spirit about its extraterrestrial origins and be more likely, instead, to have the psychic stuffing knocked out of him by a gang of corpulent gargoyles riding jet-powered merry-go-round horses."

"Do the gargoyles have Ninja swords?" Jimmy asks him.

"Absolutely," Lloyd answers without hesitating.

"I thought so."

"T.S. Eliot said '*Old men ought to be explorers*,'" quotes Lloyd. "*Shamanic* explorers, I'd clarify. But even a seasoned man of the world can face difficulties in that wider realm. He might, for instance, find

himself making love to a sultry Babylonian priestess—his *anima*—but if he hasn't yet crossed the Choronzon to transcend his own ego, that priestess in his arms could mutate into a hideous corpse-demon bent on his soul's destruction."

"Has that ever happened to you?" Skip asks, entirely credulous.

"Only in slow motion, during my marriage."

"Too bad, Boo-Boo..." Twinker says, making a moue to telegraph her fraudulent sympathy. She's officially drunk.

"That's just how things work out sometimes," Lloyd says with a self-pitying sigh. "To access the Higher Self, you must go through the Lower Self. The passageway to Heaven is routed through Hell, as we all know."

"The diamond of Eternal Truth lies beneath a spewing volcano of Horseshit," says D.H., stroking an imaginary Fu Manchu mustache.

And a hard-on can lead you to wisdom... thinks Gordon. "Have you ever tripped on mushrooms yourself?" he asks Lloyd.

"I have not," Lloyd admits, "although I've ingested *ayahuasca*."

"*Gesundheit!*" D.H. says, as if Lloyd had just sneezed.

"Ayahuasca..." Lloyd pronounces with greater care. "It's a brew made from two plant ingredients, boiled together for hours. The first comes from the leaves of a bush containing the hallucinogenic alkaloid, *dimethyltryptamine*, which is also secreted as a hormone by the human brain—squirted out by the pineal gland, I believe. But you can't just eat the leaves and start seeing things, because a stomach enzyme called *monoamine oxidase* inhibits its effects. That's where the second plant comes in—a liana vine called *Banisteriopsis caapi* often found growing in charming double helices. It's also known as *yagé* or ayahuasca, which translates as 'vine of the soul.' William Burroughs believed this vine contained a drug called *telepathine*, but he was, quite frankly, talking out of his ass. The ayahuasca vine merely contains a substance that inactivates monoamine oxidase in the digestive tract, allowing dimethyltryptamine—or DMT—to do its trick. It's the DMT that produces true hallucinations, visions so strong and convincing they can seem to swamp ordinary reality entirely. Linus Pauling would be able to explain this to you better, but on a molecular basis, I've been told that the same neural receptors that accept the common brain hormone

serotonin also accept DMT, like a lock that accepts similar keys. What's fascinating is that shamans throughout the Amazon were able to discover how these two plant species worked together to modify human consciousness—out of some 80,000 species to choose from. The shamans themselves say the knowledge came to them directly from conversations they had with the hallucinogenic plant spirits."

"Sort of a chicken-or-the-egg thing they've got going there," Gordon observes.

"I like to think someone ate a hallucinogenic mushroom first, and the mushroom spirit then told them how to brew ayahuasca. But that's just me..." Lloyd says.

"God, Lloyd," Twinker laughs, "have you ever tried giving a talk at a business lunch for the Rotarians? You're too fucking weird."

"Have some more champagne, dear," Lloyd says, refilling Twinker's glass with the last of the Dom Pérignon. "I've actually lectured to the Rotarians on more than one occasion, as a recruitment ploy for the Freemasons. You'd be surprised—some of them are quite open-minded."

"Open-minded enough to book a cruise ship down the Amazon so they can hang out with shamans and hallucinate their Rotarian heinies off with you?" D.H. asks him.

"For my one and only experience with ayahuasca, I didn't take the trouble to do it in the Amazon with an authentic shaman," Lloyd elucidates with a tight smile. "Instead, I had a quart of ayahuasca juice prepared for me in Peru and shipped to Kingsburg at considerable expense. I drank it in my living room with Miles Davis on the stereo—the Carnegie Hall recording of *Dark Magus*, which seemed appropriate at the time."

"I would've thought *Bitches Brew*," D.H. says, "but *Dark Magus* works—although it's a little scary."

"I expected the experience to be scary," Lloyd says. "After all, any true change is accompanied by terror, dread, and anxiety as we let go of our old illusions and outworn patterns of existence. One of the most common shamanic visions is of a vividly depicted journey to hell, during which the shaman-to-be's body is ritually disemboweled and dismembered. Granted, this happens in a visionary trance state, not in actuality, but still... it must be quite frightening, don't you think?"

"Hell yeah!" Skip agrees. "Even just seeing Count Chocula freaked the fuck right out of me."

"What's interesting to think about," says Lloyd, "is how the shaman stands in direct opposition to the serial killer: He eviscerates himself (rather than others), for the good of his community (rather than to terrorize it). His voluntary madness can lead to healing and spiritual integration, as opposed to the serial killer's involuntary madness, which only leads to chaos, destruction, and death."

"And you signed up for it," Gordon says. "For voluntary madness."

"I did. As Rimbaud so eloquently put it, the Poet becomes a seer by *'immense et raisonne dereglement de tous les sens'*—an immense and systematic derangement of the senses. I comforted myself with the knowledge that, in most cases, after the initiate's body has been dismembered, it's reassembled again—often with a stone placed inside it that conveys special psychic powers. For centuries, this has been the way shamanic initiates have become shamans. It dates back to one of the oldest myths of civilization, the Sumerian myth of Inanna's Descent to the Underworld."

"So did you get disemboweled, or what, you poor fat bastard?" Jimmy asks. He's not interested in mythology.

"Let me put it to you like this..." says Lloyd, "my bowels suffered mightily, but I was not, as hoped, disemboweled in any meaningful way."

"What's that mean?"

"I found out the hard way that ayahuasca is a powerful emetic. That's why I wasn't too harsh with you this past Halloween when I found out you'd thrown up in my Tang Dynasty vase. I'd used that vase for the very same purpose just a few years earlier."

"Gross!" Jimmy laughs. "I'll bet you puked twice as hard as I did!"

"It was a gusher," Lloyd candidly admits. "You wouldn't believe how incredibly foul ayahuasca tastes. It's like drinking rancid grapefruit juice mixed with someone else's chewing tobacco spit. I kept it down for about an hour. By then the hallucinations—or, I should say, the widening of my visual spectrum into nonordinary reality—had begun in earnest. So when the urge came to vomit, I indulged it, spewing like

a gargoyle on a Gothic cathedral's rain gutter. To the detriment of my eternal cosmic relations with the Tang Dynasty, however, I felt too woozy to leave my chair."

"You're lucky you didn't shit your pants," says Jimmy, always on the lookout for the next worst-case scenario.

"That came later."

"*Oh great!*" Jimmy rolls over on his back in the sand, laughing his ass off. He looks like a feral dog ecstatically rolling in a pile of rotting fish carcasses to cover itself with their scent.

"What kind of things did you see?" Gordon asks Lloyd, curious.

"Well, at first I felt myself in the presence of invisible beings of great intelligence. It's hard to describe, but it seemed as though I could *see* their invisibility, as one sees the clear skin of paramecium teeming in a drop of pond water under a microscope lens. It was as if they had the ability to camouflage themselves against the background environment, but I glimpsed their outlines sparkling at the edge of my vision. If they *hadn't* been invisible, I suspect they might have lived up to the descriptions of the Shoggoths in H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos—massive, protoplasmic beasts that had been created by the star-headed Old Ones. Although understand... I don't think they actually *were* Shoggoths. They were far too intelligent for that."

"Enough with the damn Shoggoths," says Twinker, holding her empty champagne glass up to Skip and indicating that he should fill it with beer.

"Almost shouting to be heard above Miles Davis, I asked if someone else was in the room with me." Lloyd calls out, "*Is anybody there?*" in an attempt to dramatize the situation. "I heard an urgent and powerful voice say, '*Yes!*' directly in my left ear. They called themselves the *Sensaurians* I learned in that very same instant, as the invisible beings began communicating with me in a sort of telepathic dream-language. Words blended into things seen. I no longer had any need to speak. I mentally asked them if they were from a realm that transcended space and time. They said they were indeed. They went on to tell me that the majority of human beings were *sarcogenetic*—cut off from the source of eternal life. They also had a word for that source of eternal life, which I've since forgotten... because right at that moment I started vomiting."

“Ooh, *that* must’ve impressed the hell out of ‘em,” Twinker slurs.

“The Sensaurians were far beyond the point of ever being impressed by a mere human,” Lloyd says. “Just being in their presence was a profoundly humbling experience. By the time I finished vomiting, they were gone. In their place I saw two luminous, multi-colored snakes swimming through the air in front of me, thrusting and wriggling about like interstellar sperm in the darkened room.”

“Did you accidentally have a big orgasm while you were puking?” Jimmy asks, sitting up again. “Because that’s happened to me before,” he says with lippy candor.

“The snakes began darting in and out of my solar plexus,” Lloyd says, ignoring his gutter-minded nephew. “It was terrifying. There was nothing I could do to stop them. I could feel them wriggling in and out of my body as if I were a hunk of melting Swiss cheese. It was a most loathsome feeling, I can assure you.... Using the same telepathic dream-language as the Sensaurians, the snakes told me they wanted to live inside my belly. If I’d grant them that small favor, they said that in return they’d always tell me who my enemies were and how to overcome them, and they’d answer any questions I might have that were otherwise unanswerable. I knew from my extensive reading on the subject that other ayahuasca-drinkers had sometimes had visions of snakes entering their brains or stomachs. Usually they plucked the snakes out, unable to overcome their deep sense of revulsion. But I chose to let the snakes in.”

Lloyd pauses to let those last words have their full effect. “The snakes thanked me for deciding in their favor. Then, as a little foretaste of the knowledge they would soon be imparting, they told me that the word *America* had been derived from the Peruvian word *Amarecu*, which means ‘Land of the Plumed Serpents.’

“At that point I clenched my teeth, gripped the arms of my chair, and commenced beshitting myself. The visions soon ended. But I’ve often wondered since if I made the right decision.”

“To shit your pants or not?” Jimmy asks him.

“About the snakes.”

“Well, let’s see...” Twinker chirps through the onset of a bad case of hiccups, “you were out of your mind on drugs—*hic*—seeing talking snakes—*hic*—and you were filling your pants with poopy diarrhea

from sheer terror. *Of course*, you made the right decision, Lloyd... *'hic.'* You were acting *sooooo* smart right then."

"Your maternal instincts are showing, my dear," Lloyd says, blowing her a kiss.

"She's always like this when she gets drunk," Skip complains. "She's like a damn mother hen."

"I am not!" Twinker hiccups, then laughs at herself. "Yeah, I guess I am...."

"Shamanic experience depends on what we bring to it," says Lloyd. "Spirits, or archetypes—even demons—tend to reflect what's already within our hearts and minds. If you come from a place of love and wisdom, love and wisdom is ultimately what you'll find. On the other hand, a lifetime spent watching made-for-TV movies isn't going to qualify you for a spiritually liberating entelechy. If you come with a flabby intellect and the typical load of American pop-culture-formed sensibilities, your experiences will likewise tend to be violent, carnal, and cartoonish."

"And if you come mostly full of crap," says Jimmy, employing the same pedantic tone, "you might end up having to change your underpants."

"*Touché, mon neveu....* I'm perhaps not the best one to speak. I should point you instead to the work of James Merrill—the poet son of one of Merrill Lynch's founders, if you'll recall.... His epic poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, is a perfect illustration of what I'm trying to convey."

"Never heard of it," Jimmy sneers.

"That's not surprising, even though it won both the National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Few people care much about poetry these days. There's no money in it. But Merrill labored over *The Changing Light at Sandover* for more than twenty years, even though he's wealthy enough to do whatever he pleases. The complete poem cycle, all 560 pages, was published in its entirety only last spring. What's fascinating about it is that much of the poem was channeled through a Ouija board, with Merrill and his partner, David Jackson, taking dictation from spirits. Those spirits included, among others, their departed friends Maya Deren—the doyenne of American experimental film—and W.H. Auden—the celebrated poet."

"Weird..." says Skip. "I always thought the Pulitzer only went to journalists, like those guys who reported on Watergate. I didn't know they gave out prizes to poets and fortune-tellers, too."

"Only to the *rich* fortune-tellers," D.H. jokes. "The gypsy fortune-tellers don't stand a chance."

"James Merrill's true riches are his cultural inheritance and his astonishing intellect. He's a man with a profound understanding of Dante, Milton, and Blake. In some ways, he might very well be their equal.... *The Changing Light at Sandover* contains insights into non-ordinary reality that even the most 'supernaturally knowledgeable' shaman might not be able to put into words—and certainly not words so beautifully strung together and multi-faceted as Merrill's."

"Okay, so I guess you like the guy," Gordon says.

"Maybe you should've married him," Jimmy sneers again.

"And your point is... what?" D.H. asks. "Smart people with really big trust funds make better shamans?"

Lloyd replies: "Not at all. I prefer the explanation set forth by one of the entities channeled through Merrill's Ouija board (and please excuse my paraphrase): *Your lives are polished and hoisted into place, like crystals, to receive the Light*. James Merrill has had a lot of polishing—that's all I'm saying."

"Oh wow... that's *deep!*" says Twinker. It's not hard to tell she's being facetious. Bored, she scoots over in the sand and sticks her tongue in Skip's ear. Skip half-swoons and automatically grabs her tits.

"This concept of human beings as receivers for the Light ties in with the Gnostic prophet Mani's vision of creation," Lloyd explains to the others still listening. "In case you haven't run across him, Mani was born in 216 AD in Lower Mesopotamia, in the same general area as ancient Sumer, within the borders of present-day Iraq. He was a prodigy who by the age of twelve began receiving a series of calls from an angel that he referred to as his immortal Twin, or Divine Self."

"I didn't even know they had phones back then," Skip interrupts, playing the fool for Twinker's benefit.

"I'll bet the angel had a mechanical-sounding voice like that computer from the future that was making all those prank calls to Jack Sarfatti," says Gordon, catching on.

“Only this was about seventeen-and-a-half centuries earlier,” says D.H., doing the math.

“That’s a fascinating connection to make,” says Lloyd, “but I think you all know that I was using the term *calls* as a synonym for *visitations*. During those visitations, the angel provided Mani with insights into the secrets of creation and spiritual evolution, which later became the basis for the Manichaean religion. One of the greatest secrets revealed to Mani during that time concerned the nature of Light and Darkness—or good and evil—and the beginning of creation.”

“If this is another snake story—’*biv*’—I’ll need more beer,” Twinker says.

“No snakes,” Lloyd promises. “This is about how the Spirits of Darkness sought to invade and conquer the Kingdom of Light.”

“Oh goody. A fairy tale...” says Jimmy, rolling his eyes.

“Not a fairy tale so much as a myth that explains why evil exists in our world, and why it so often goes unpunished,” Lloyd says. “In Mani’s version of the creation myth, the Creator of the Kingdom of Light experienced a moment of doubt just before he set creation in motion. Through the crack of that doubt, the Spirits of Darkness were born. They immediately set out to invade the Kingdom of Light and wage war upon it, but they were unable to breach its gates. The Creator was vexed. He saw that the Spirits of Darkness were evil and violent. They deserved to be punished, but how could he punish them when his Kingdom knew only goodness? There was but one solution: the Light would have to embrace Darkness in an act of love. So a part of the Kingdom of Light was given over to the Spirits of Darkness. Darkness and Light intermingled in a whirling dance of creation that evolved into the material universe. Evil and death were woven into the very fabric of this universe, as well as the Divine Spark that originated from the Creator of Light himself. But again, the Creator was vexed. He saw that creation would ultimately destroy itself unless evil and death were overcome. So he had the Spirits of Light create humanity in their own images and likenesses—mortal twins. Those mortal twins were then sent to incarnate on Earth, the mixed kingdom, so they could bring more Light—and clarify the Light already there—through acts of love and forgiveness. This was done, and continues to be done, because the Spirits of Light know that punishment or banishment will

never vanquish the Spirits of Darkness. It's only when Light enters evil, and illuminates it from within, that evil is redeemed and thereby overcome."

"Man, that is *some story*..." Gordon says. He's read a dozen or so Gnostic creation myths similar to it, but never one as sublime as Mani's. In the back of his mind, however, he wonders if it really *is* Mani's creation myth, and not just Lloyd's intentionally warped Masonic interpretation of it.

"That Mani guy sounds like he was high on some damn good drugs," says Skip, a bit wistfully.

"Actually, there's a strong argument to be made that the Manichaeans were using hallucinogenic mushrooms as a sacrament," Lloyd says. "First off, the Manichaeans were vegetarians. They believed fruits, grains, and vegetables contained higher concentrations of the Light, since plant life didn't indulge in copulation as animals did, which diluted the Divine Spark by spreading it ever more thinly through successive generations. And they believed mushrooms had the purest concentrations of Light of all, because mushrooms were thought to be 'seedless.'"

"I guess they hadn't heard about Terence McKenna's intergalactic mushroom spores," says Gordon.

"I'm sure they hadn't," says Lloyd. "There's also historical evidence indicating that 12th-century Manichaeans had migrated to China and provoked the ire of the Chinese authorities by eating great quantities of 'red mushrooms.' In 1968, an amateur mycologist (and Vice President of J.P. Morgan & Company) named R. Gordon Wasson published a book called, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, in which he identified those 'red mushrooms' as fly agaric—also known as *Amanita muscaria*—the same mushroom used by Siberian shamans for their vision quests."

"I thought those were poisonous mushrooms," D.H. says, "not the good kind that grows on cow manure."

"You're right... *Amanita* mushrooms can be fatally toxic, especially when eaten raw," says Lloyd. "But if mature fly agarics are sun-dried—or baked into 'bread'—their toxicity is considerably diminished. As an alternative method of detoxification, the leader of a mushroom cult could slowly build up a tolerance to the fly agaric's

poisons by eating small but ever-increasing doses of it over a long period of time—perhaps years.... All during that time, the hallucination-inducing chemicals from the mushrooms would be passing unmetabolized through the leader's urine, while their toxic effects would be mollified somewhat by filtration through his liver. When drunk by the leader's flock, that urine would cause hallucinations. The Manichaeans, just so you know, had been accused of being urine-drinkers."

"Oh that's just *gross!*" Skip groans.

"*Ick!*" Twinker seconds.

"It kind of makes you think twice about that whole business with Jesus turning water into wine," Gordon says pragmatically.

"Even if he *was* Jesus," declares Jimmy, "I still wouldn't drink his piss."

"There's been some scholarly debate about whether the historic Jesus actually existed," Lloyd says. "One of the original translators of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a man named John Marco Allegro, is convinced Jesus *didn't* exist. In his book, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, published in 1970, Allegro makes a semi-cogent argument for Jesus being a mushroom."

"Where do you find these nuts?" D.H. laughs. "In the bargain basement bins of Books-R-Us?"

"You shouldn't be so quick to judge," Lloyd cautions him. "Allegro had access to information, in the Scrolls, that's being withheld from the public at the insistence of his academic peers and the Catholic Church. Allegro's main thesis was that the paleo-Asiatic peoples in the Near East had used mushrooms for shamanic rituals that over time evolved into mushroom-based mystery cults. According to Allegro, the *Amanita muscaria* was known to these ancient cults as the 'penis mushroom' and partaking of it often resulted in hallucination-fueled orgies—as one might expect, given a cognomen such as that..."

"Right on!" Jimmy says, pumping his fist.

"Around the time of Jesus, the orgies were attracting the attention of persecuting local authorities (*Romans*, for one), so the cults went into hiding. They started encrypting allegories of their sacred mushroom

rituals and mushroom gnosis into adaptations of the old mythologies, as a way of keeping their secrets alive. To this we owe the Jesus stories of the New Testament. *Jesus*, according to Allegro, was a code name for the mushroom, which he traced all the way back to its ancient Sumerian roots.”

“So when Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of life,’ what he’s really talking about is mushroom bread,” Gordon says, trying to understand.

“Well, it makes a certain amount of sense, doesn’t it? He is ‘the living bread that has come down from heaven.’ Remember what Terence McKenna’s *Stropharia cubensis* mushroom said about its intergalactic travels? And how about the phrase, ‘Anyone who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood will have eternal life’? Instead of a wild-eyed exhortation to cannibalism, maybe this is Jesus the Symbiote Mushroom talking, hoping to hitch a ride on a human nervous system by making promises it may or may not be able to keep. After all, the *Psilocybe* mushrooms that R. Gordon Wasson sampled down in Mexico for a 1957 *Life* magazine article were known as *teonanacatl*, or ‘God’s flesh.’”

“So during Holy Communion, the flesh is really supposed to be mushroom flesh and the blood is supposed to be a *mushroom cult leader’s whiz?*” D.H., like Gordon, is doing his best to follow along.

Lloyd nods his head. “As for the Holy Trinity: the Father would be God, the Son would be the Mushroom, and the Holy Ghost would be that strange little mushroom voice that speaks to you after you’ve eaten God’s Son. You also might call it the Logos... but the Logos, I’m convinced, is far more than just a hallucination induced by a mushroom. It’s an infinitely intelligent, sympathetic, and *loving* force in the universe that operates throughout a whole range of frequencies, including those biophotonic pulses in our DNA. The Logos is always trying to speak to us. It never gives up. We can interact with it, but first we need to learn how to listen to it. In ancient Sumerian, as John Allegro explained, the word for *ear* and *wisdom* is the same.”

“And you *believe* this stuff?” Gordon asks. “Jesus was a mushroom and all that?”

“I try to keep an open mind about such things,” says Lloyd. “I’m always looking for answers that others, trapped in consensus reality, might have overlooked. There’s a saying from the Gospel of Thomas

that I'm particularly fond of. I've known it by heart ever since the Nag Hammadi texts were first translated into English. It's something Jesus was supposed to have said to Thomas—who was revered by the Syrian Christians as Jesus' mortal twin, in case you didn't know. The saying goes:

"Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will be troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All."

"Cool," says Gordon. He has a lot to think about. It occurs to him that what Jesus was essentially saying was, *The Truth will set you free, but first it'll piss you off and blow your mind.*

"We've dallied too long past sundown," Lloyd says with sudden apprehension. "I shouldn't have allowed it, but I was enjoying the food and conversation too much... and besides, Esalen isn't far now." Quickly, he starts packing up the picnic basket as Jimmy brays:

"Let's hit the road!"



"Onward to Esalen!"

"Land of the Naked Hippie Chicks in Hot Tubs!" Jimmy shouts, matching Lloyd's enthusiasm as the Bentley exits Limekiln State Park and rolls back onto the Pacific Coast Highway. It seems Jimmy has accompanied Lloyd to Esalen before—or at least heard stories about it.

"I read somewhere that Hunter S. Thompson was the caretaker at Esalen while he was writing his book about the Hells Angels," Gordon says, twiddling the knob on the Bentley's bird's-eye maple glovebox. "Is that true, Lloyd? Do you know?"

"Hunter Thompson did indeed once reside at Esalen—but that was back in the early sixties, before Esalen was *Esalen*." As the Bentley accelerates, Lloyd's toupee flaps like a frightened mallard launching off a lake into a stiff breeze. "You should know that Hunter had a rather insalubrious habit of drinking vast quantities of rum and firing high-powered automatic weapons at the local sea life during his so-called 'caretaker' duties. I believe he once fatally wounded a bull elephant seal with an AK-47 at close range."

"That sounds like him," Gordon says.

"I've heard the seagulls in his immediate vicinity suffered a precipitous drop in population as well," says Lloyd. "The property at the time belonged to Michael Murphy's grandmother, Bunny Murphy."

It always starts with a bunny... thinks Gordon.

"When Michael found out about Hunter's ballistic transgressions, he banished him and leased the land from Grandma Bunny to start what *Newsweek* has since dubbed 'the Harvard of the Human Potential Movement.'"

"Or the Yale of Yuppie New Age Narcissism," D.H. counters, unimpressed. "Didn't Charles Manson play a concert there a few days before he decided to kill Sharon Tate?"

"I know people who witnessed that so-called 'concert' firsthand. Some say the resounding lack of enthusiasm for Manson's vocal stylings soured him on the whole human race—thereby initiating his career as a mass murderer. In that regard, it's too bad Esalen was such a tough crowd."

"Are you sure Manson wasn't brainwashed at Esalen and then told to go off and kill people like some kind of sick puppy?" Twinker asks from the backseat, where she's drunkenly slumped across the laps of Jimmy, D.H., and Skip.

All right, Twinker! thinks Gordon, grinning. *A few glasses of champagne and you're suddenly one-upping Lloyd as a conspiracy theorist.*

Lloyd coolly replies: "Much as I'd like to believe otherwise, that can't be ruled out as a possibility. Oddly enough, one of Manson's other victims—Abigail Folger—had also visited Esalen for an extended stay earlier that same summer. Perhaps Manson had been told to go after her... or perhaps disinformation agents associated with the Nixon White House just wanted us to think that for their own nefarious purposes."

"You have to admit, it's a weird coincidence," Twinker slurs.

"Yes it is," Lloyd agrees. "But those 'weird coincidences' just keep piling up once you start paying attention. It's almost as if the collective unconscious intentionally deploys familiar literary devices such as foreshadowing, shared circumstances, and a limited cast of central characters as a way of stimulating greater reading comprehension for

those who, in the timeless leisure of the afterlife, choose to check out the historical facts from the Library of Akashic Records.”

Skip asks, “So you’re saying we get a library card when we die?”

“It makes a certain amount of sense, doesn’t it? If consciousness survives death, wouldn’t your curiosity about life remain intact? Wouldn’t you want to pursue further research? And where’s the best place to do research?”

“A library.” Gordon, for one, certainly knows that.

“So when we’re dead we can just go to this Ass-Kicking Library place and look under M for Manson and get the whole story?” Skip sounds like he desperately wants it to be true.

Lloyd answers, “Someday we’ll know the truth about everything, I hope. I’m also hoping the truth will reveal that our lives had *meaning*.... I’ve often thought of the holographic universe as a vast Borgesian riddle working itself out in the minds of each and every one of us. However, the trouble with such a universe, as I see it, is that misinterpretation can create a shared reality that seems just as real at times as reality-in-truth—provided enough people believe in it. Think of the Holocaust and how fascist propaganda churned out fake doctrines of xenophobic hatred that became real enough to generate a creeping moral leprosy, leading to the death of millions. Similar acts of bad faith have occurred in America and other parts of the world as well—like the trumped-up Gulf of Tonkin Incident, for example, which led to the escalation of the war in Vietnam. When the crazed minds of panting maniacs and poisonous buffoons meet in synchrony, they create an alternate reality—a *conspiracy of false consciousness*—that provides them with the bent justifications they need to murder, rape, and steal. And the innocents of the world suffer for it.”

“So somewhere along the line—maybe at Esalen—Manson must’ve met some people who were just as evil and screwed up as he was,” Gordon surmises.

“If not more so,” Lloyd says.

“He had the Family. What more did he need?” asks Jimmy.

“The Family was made up of followers. The people I’m referring to are natural born leaders—and their dark agendas are often difficult

to discern. Are they good? Are they bad? You never know... you just can't tell at first."

"Like the Grand Chignon and Ronald Reagan," says Gordon. *And you*, he thinks, but doesn't say out loud.

"It's even more subtle than that," says Lloyd. "There's one person I'm thinking of in particular, now that we've broached the subject of Esalen's shadow side. His name is Andrija Puharich. I think I may have mentioned him earlier in connection to Uri Geller."

"You said he was Geller's CIA handler," Gordon reminds him.

"Yes, well, I could be mistaken about that. I have no way of knowing for certain if Puharich is on the CIA's payroll, although it seems incredibly likely. John Lilly once confided to me that much of his LSD research had been secretly funded under the aegis of the CIA's MKULTRA program. Tim Leary's, too. I was hardly surprised, given what I know about the CIA's interest in mind control and enhanced psychic abilities—and their potential application to military and intelligence operations, which would include assassinations. I'd be even less surprised to find out that Puharich's activities had been similarly funded. In many ways, he's their ideal candidate."

"He sounds like a bastard," Twinker says, apropos of almost nothing.

"He's *complicated*..." Lloyd replies. "Puharich knew R. Gordon Wasson—the mushroom expert. Together, in June of 1955, they attempted the first remote viewing experiment—almost twenty years before Ingo Swann's successful efforts at the Stanford Research Institute. Of course, they weren't calling it remote viewing then. In their minds it was a long-distance test of 'Extrasensory Perception Projection.' Wasson was traveling to Mexico to research the mushroom cult he was writing about for *Life* magazine (a trip funded by MKULTRA's Subproject 58, by the way...). He'd promised Puharich that while he was in Mexico he'd try to find a mushroom-munching *curandero* who would project his astral body to Puharich's parapsychological laboratory in Glen Cove, Maine and report on the goings-on there. Wasson had met Puharich in Manhattan and had never been to the lab in Maine—a suspected CIA cut-out operation called the Round Table Foundation—so if the *curandero* proved able to

describe anything in the lab at all, he wouldn't be getting any help from Wasson, telepathic or otherwise."

Twinkler asks, "So did the *curandero* pass the test?"

"Wasson chose to eat the *teonanacatl* mushroom himself and was so addled by the resulting visions that he couldn't do anything useful. The experiment was considered a failure. But Puharich had better luck a few months later with a telepathy demonstration he'd arranged for Aldous Huxley."

"Jesus, the guy knew everybody!" Gordon says. "You're talking about Huxley the writer... *Brave New World*, *The Doors of Perception*, and *Eyeless in Gaza*, right?"

"The same," Lloyd confirms.

"Jim Morrison named *The Doors* after *The Doors of Perception*, which was about Huxley tripping on mescaline," D.H. fills in.

"Everyone knows *that*," Jimmy scoffs.

"What most people *don't* know is that it was Puharich who'd supplied Huxley with the mescaline in the first place," Lloyd says with authority. "He was a man with many strange connections. Around the same time that Huxley was writing *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*, Puharich was working with a reluctant psychic named Harry Stone who sometimes unknowingly fell into trances and became possessed by an Egyptian entity called Rahotep. The interesting thing about Rahotep was that he—or *it*—could speak and draw hieroglyphs in an archaic form of the Egyptian language from around 2700 BC. During one such trance, fortuitously in front of Huxley, the Rahotep entity requested an *Amanita muscaria* mushroom that Puharich had found not far from his lab in a location that he'd been told about during a previous channeling session. (*Amanita* mushrooms are quite rare in Maine, but there was Puharich, skipping about with a wicker basket, picking them like daisies.) Once the Rahotep entity had the *Amanita muscaria* in its hot little borrowed hands, it ritualistically applied the mushroom cap to the tip of Harry Stone's tongue and then to the top of his skull. Harry woke up a few moments later feeling quite drunk. Despite his obvious inebriation, Puharich insisted that Harry perform a simple but fraud-proof ESP test. Harry aced the test—made a perfect score at million-to-one odds—while Huxley looked on in astonishment. Puharich surmised that the ritual use of *Amanita muscaria*

could temporarily dissociate the soul from the body, resulting in a dramatic increase in psychic powers. You'll find all of this detailed in Puharich's book, *The Sacred Mushroom: Key to the Door of Eternity*, which he published in 1959."

"So if some book has the word *Mushroom* in its title, you buy it—no matter what. Right?" D.H. asks Lloyd.

"Like *Sacred Mushrooms and the National Security State*," riffs Gordon. "There's no way you'd pass that one up."

"Even in jest you hew closer to the truth than you know," Lloyd smirks. "In 1952, Puharich briefed Pentagon officials on the military uses of enhanced psychic abilities in a lecture entitled, 'An Evaluation of the Possible Usefulness of Extrasensory Perception in Psychological Warfare.' In case you think I'm just making that up, you'll find that same information was also published in the *Washington Post* during the summer of 1977, when new revelations about MKULTRA seemed to be coming out every day—in a large part due to Jimmy Carter's antipathy toward the CIA."

"Right on, Jimmy!" says Jimmy.

"There's more, of course. The connections just keep getting stranger. Puharich was drafted not long after he gave his Pentagon lecture. He served as a medical officer at the Army Chemical Center at Edgewood, Maryland from 1953 to 1955. During that time, the Chief of the US Chemical Warfare Division—Puharich's boss—was Doctor Laurence J. Layton, whose namesake son would end up, twenty-five years later, as the only person to be tried and convicted for his role in the Jonestown massacre."

"You're kidding!" Skip exclaims.

"I'm deadly serious... and I'm only getting started," replies Lloyd. "One of the major backers for Puharich's Round Table Foundation was former Vice President Henry Wallace—the man responsible for getting the pyramid with the floating eye on the back of our dollar bills. Two other friends and financial backers were the inventor of the Bell helicopter, Arthur M. Young, and his wife, Ruth Forbes Paine. Ruth happened to be the great-granddaughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson and an heiress to the *Boston Forbes* family fortune—very old money, and lots of it. Arthur and Ruth have an odd connection to more recent history as well: their daughter-in-law in Dallas, who was also named Ruth

Paine, happened to be a close friend of a young Russian émigré named Marina Oswald. In 1963, Marina and her children moved in with Ruth, while Marina's semi-estranged husband, *Lee Harvey Oswald*, kept his Mannlicher-Carcano rifle stored in Ruth's garage."

"Holy crap!" Skip comments.

Gordon has something to contribute: "Did you guys know that Aldous Huxley took a massive dose of LSD and died on the same day that JFK was shot?"

"You couldn't make this shit up if you tried!" says Skip, at once credulous and vulgar.

"*One must always try to be as radical as reality itself,*" says Lloyd, quoting Lenin.

"So this Puharich guy is connected to Jonestown, the JFK assassination, Aldous Huxley, and the pyramid on the back of the dollar bill," D.H. sums up.

"Let's not forget Uri Geller, the CIA, and the Stanford Research Institute," Lloyd says. "And it gets even stranger. Back in 1952—the same year that our friend Jack Sarfatti was getting those cold, mechanical-sounding phone calls—Andrija Puharich was working at the Round Table Foundation with an Indian mystic known as Doctor D.G. Vinod. Doctor Vinod had been making his way through the states by giving lectures at Rotary Club luncheons. He was a trance channeller who claimed he was in touch with a sort of collective intelligence, or a group entity, that referred to itself as God's 'Nine Principles and Forces'—or more simply, *The Nine*."

"I guess you were right about those Rotarians being open-minded," says Twinker. "The guy sounds *my loco*, if you ask me."

"Yeah—*The Nine*..." Jimmy makes it sound like he's doing voice-over narration for a drive-in horror movie trailer. "I mean, how dumb can you get?"

"Dumb though it may seem, the influence of The Nine has been felt in some very rarified circles," says Lloyd. "Puharich arranged for Doctor Vinod's trance sessions to take place among a group of nine people, which included Arthur Young and Ruth Forbes Paine, along with members of the DuPont and Astor families. During those sessions, The Nine claimed they were directing mankind's evolution

toward a new age of human consciousness. The nine people assembled there had been chosen to promote The Nine's earthly agenda. Speaking through Vinod, The Nine told them: "There is no God other than what we are together."

"They sound kinda conceited," slurs Twinker—as if The Nine was just another stuck-up high school clique.

"I should remind you that 1952 was also the year that nine disc-shaped UFOs were famously seen over Washington D.C., buzzing Capitol Hill and the White House," Lloyd says.

"So you're saying The Nine flew around in UFOs?"

"That was the conclusion that Puharich eventually reached. After Doctor Vinod returned to India, Puharich mistakenly believed his communications with The Nine were over. But just a few years later, while he was down in Mexico looking to have some shamanic fun with his psychic pal, Peter Hurkos, Puharich bumped into an American couple called the Laugheads, from Whipple, Arizona. The Laugheads had been Protestant missionaries in Egypt before they became involved with a group of American UFO contactees. One young man of their acquaintance claimed to be in telepathic contact with a variety of alien races on a regular basis, including a group of extraterrestrials calling themselves—"

"—*The Nine*," says everyone in the backseat with a collective roll of their eyes.

"Small world," Gordon says. "And what's with that name—*The Laugheads*? And *Whipple*, Arizona?"

"Yes, it sounds like someone's whipping up an inside joke, doesn't it?" Lloyd muses. "But the Laugheads proved their sincerity a month later by sending Puharich a letter full of undisclosed details about his sessions with Doctor Vinod, details that had been channeled directly from The Nine—or so they claimed. Included were the exact dates when the sessions took place and some information about the Lorentz-Einstein Transformation formula that had been bandied about. For Puharich, that letter served as independent confirmation of The Nine's existence. It also proved they were able to make contact with other mediums besides Doctor Vinod. From that point on, Puharich became obsessed with The Nine. He started seeing evidence of their hidden hand everywhere, guiding him through life."

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

Channeling the Beatles (specifically Ringo), D.H. sings: “*I get by with a little help from my friends—*”

“—*Gonna try with a little help from my friends,*” everyone else joins in.

“So what’s all this have to do with Esalen?” Gordon asks Lloyd.

“I’m getting to that,” he answers, “but the short answer is that The Nine is listed on the Esalen Institute’s staff.”

“What the fuck?”

“It’s best if I explain how the situation evolved naturally.”

“There’s nothing natural about nine superior, stuck-up aliens on the staff of some whacked-out New Age mind control camp,” says Twinker, speaking for all of them. “Why are you taking us there, Lloyd? *Really*—what’s your plan?”

“Yeah! Who’re you working for?” D.H. demands to know, making it sound like a joke.

“I’m not aligned with Puharich and I don’t trust The Nine, if that’s what you’re concerned about,” Lloyd says. “I’d promised to tell you about Esalen’s shadow side, and there it is: full disclosure.”

“Full disclosure, my butt,” says Jimmy. “Tell ‘em about the Space Kids and Project MONARCH.”

“Those topics aren’t specific to Esalen, but I was getting to them before you all so rudely decided to jump down my throat. Trust me,” says Lloyd, “everything will make more sense if you allow me to explain it in my own good time.”

“Trusting you is starting to seem like a bad idea,” Twinker says.

“Although thanks for the sandwiches—and *the beer...*” says Gordon.

“Yeah, that was cool,” Skip chips in.

Gordon is suddenly sporting a hard-on that seems determined to swashbuckle its way right out of his pants. But at the same time, he feels vaguely depressed. *Weird*.

Up ahead, in the dimming twilight, the big wooden sign for the Esalen Institute looms on their left. Lloyd switches on the Bentley’s headlights and deliberately drives right past it.

“Hey, you just passed Esalen!” Jimmy complains from the backseat.

“Right,” Lloyd says with a determined jut of his double chin. “I want this choice to be made of your own free volition. I’m not taking anyone there if they don’t want to go.”

“Turn the car around. Let’s just get there already,” Gordon says. He intuitively knows it’s the right decision.

“No,” says Twinker, suddenly sounding very sober. “I want to know more about The Nine first. Keep driving.”

The Bentley continues heading north. “I’ll try to make this as brief as possible,” Lloyd says, “since we’re already running late. As I was telling you, Andrija Puharich came to believe The Nine were invisibly directing the course of his life. With their assistance he started patenting and marketing inventions through a company he’d set up called the Intelectron Corporation, modeling himself after another eccentric but far more famous Serbian-American, the brilliant inventor, Nikola Tesla. Puharich’s life for the next twenty years became a strange mixture of science and shamanism. He traveled to Hawaii and became the first white man to be admitted into the Kahuna priesthood. He invented a tooth implant that could transmit radio waves along a person’s facial nerves, allowing deaf people to hear—as well as providing a method for ethereal voices to be received by fake clairvoyants and gullible mediums, if you catch my meaning.... He led expeditions to Brazil to study a celebrated psychic surgeon named Arigó who operated on his patients with a rusty knife—even removing brain tumors that way. He became deeply involved in researching Extremely Low Frequency (or ELF) waves that could affect our minds and behavioral patterns (at 8-hertz he believed we could ‘tune in to the sun’ and dematerialize nuclear bombs). Somewhere along the way, he also became a master hypnotist. And then he met Uri Geller.”

“And the CIA picked up the tab for all this crazy shit?” asks Gordon.

“More likely than not,” Lloyd replies. “You can see how it all could be filed under the general category of Mind Control, can’t you?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“You’re still not telling us how The Nine took over Esalen,” Twinker gripes.

“The Nine ‘took over’ exactly *nada*,” says Lloyd, irked. “But with the passing of time, more and more of Puharich’s acquaintances began channeling The Nine—including Uri Geller. It went something like

this: Puharich hypnotized Geller to ostensibly discover the source of his psychic abilities. Geller obligingly began to channel SPECTRA—the aforementioned conscious computer aboard a spaceship orbiting Earth. But then Puharich suggested there might be a connection between SPECTRA and The Nine. Lo and behold, under the influence of hypnosis, SPECTRA readily agreed with him! The Nine then came online and ‘confessed’ that they’d programmed Uri with his psychic abilities as a child, when he’d stumbled across their spaceship in a deserted Arabic garden in Tel Aviv.”

“It’s funny how SPECTRA sounds so much like those evil criminal masterminds in SPECTRE, from the James Bond movies,” Gordon observes, remembering when he watched those movies with his dad.

“Special Executors for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge, and Extortion,” Lloyd says, decoding the acronym. “Yes, I’ve often thought of that myself. Just substitute *Assassinations* for *Extortion* and there you have it. But SPECTRA also happens to be the plural form of the word *spectrum*, as in a range of wavelengths or frequencies—such as infrared to ultraviolet in the electromagnetic spectrum. It’s a synonym for *The Light*, in other words.”

“Meaning you think The Nine is basically good?” Skip asks.

“Meaning I think they could go either way,” says Lloyd. “What I *really* think is that Puharich might have invented the whole thing as a sort of CIA experiment in mass mind-conditioning that’s now run amok.”

A ball of grief swells in Gordon’s throat. He feels like crying, but he tries to hide it so no one will notice. *My 007-loving dad, he thinks. Killed in a plane crash while he thought I was still mad at him.*

“Doctor Vinod could have been an actor—an intelligence asset—and after that it was Puharich who kept the ball rolling,” Lloyd explains, but Gordon barely hears him. He’s still dwelling on his dad:

He never got to lead an army of scuba divers in an underwater spear-gun battle. Never had a chance to use the ejector seat on a tricked-out Aston-Martin. Never shot off a suave orgasm between the tits of a hot Bond chick like Ursula Andress—just my mom.... Damn!

Lloyd drones on: “Now mediums everywhere are convincing themselves that they’re channeling The Nine—all of them seeded by Puharich. There’s the hubristic Doctor James Hurtak, who’s written a

book guided by The Nine's channeled insights. *The Keys of Enoch*, he calls it, insinuating that he's able to translate the language of angels. Then there's Phyllis Schlemmer, the founder of a Psychic Center in flaky Florida, who's surrounded herself with celebrities and multi-millionaires, such as members of the Bronfman liquor family, Gene Roddenberry, and the do-gooder country singer, John Denver."

"*Rocky Mountain high...*" Jimmy sings.

The last time Gordon heard Jimmy sing that, they were both shortly puking like dogs over the back of a pick-up tailgate on their way to Dinkey Creek.

"And then there's Jenny O'Connor, who channels The Nine for seminars at the Esalen Institute," Lloyd continues. "*That's* how they've come to be listed as members of Esalen's staff. The Nine now hold such sway there that they recently sacked the Institute's chief financial officer, inciting the deed with one of their channeled communiqués."

"That's just whacked," D.H. declares. "And when you said Gene Roddenberry, did you mean the guy who created *Star Trek*?"

"I did indeed," Lloyd says as the Bentley is buffeted by a strong breeze. "In fact, it was Gene Roddenberry who uncovered the true identity of The Nine. At a channeling session with Phyllis Schlemmer in 1974, he asked The Nine directly: 'To whom am I speaking? Do you have a name?' The Nine eventually admitted they were the gods of old regarded as 'Nine That Are One' by the ancient Egyptians, otherwise known as the Great Ennead. Their individual names were: Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephtys."

"Which would make them close cousins of those Sumerian gods—the *Anunnaki*," Gordon intuits.

"The Anu-*what*?" D.H. asks from the breezy backseat.

"I really wish you hadn't said that," Lloyd grimaces. "Whenever they hear their name, they tend to remote-view where it came from."

"Oh, give me a break..." Gordon says. "You're so full of shit sometimes."

"Let's just hope nothing happens." Lloyd leans forward to peer through the windshield, paying extra attention to the road. Almost to himself, he says: "The Nine also claimed to be the Elohim of the Old Testament and the Aeons of Gnosticism—but they could just as well

be Archons, if you ask me. And I believe it was Jenny O'Connor who mentioned that they were from the Dog Star, Sirius."

"This is all tied in with that guy who channeled Rahotep, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Lloyd answers Gordon. "The historical Rahotep was the high priest of Heliopolis, the 'chief spokesman' for the Great Ennead. Puharich no doubt knew that, but why he chose to keep the identity of The Nine to himself for all those years is a mystery."

"Maybe The Nine was a lie that he thought would come true if enough people believed in it and started finding out stuff on their own," says Gordon, recalling Lloyd's little lecture on conspiracies of false consciousness. Then he wonders: *Can you also lie about a good thing in the hope that it will become real?*

"It's possible," Lloyd says with a nod of his chin. "I just can't figure out what his game is, but there's something about it that disturbs me. I suppose it's time I told you the rest of the story, about Puharich's Star Kids program, since I'm certain now that you and Jimmy would have qualified for it."

"Star Kids?" D.H. asks from the backseat. "What's that, like a talent show?"

"Just listen..." says Jimmy. "Lloyd told me about it right after I tried to shoot that dumbass hypnotist."

"Puharich had some property up in Ossining, New York that he called the Turkey Farm," says Lloyd, raising his voice so that everyone can hear. "In the mid-seventies, he started gathering children there—twenty of them, in all—ranging in age from the late-teens to as young as nine. They came from all over the world, from seven different countries. Not all of them arrived with their parents' legal consent (Puharich claimed that six of them had appeared at the ranch via teleportation). His plan was to train the children to become remote viewers. They practiced on targets of military and intelligence interest, like the Kremlin and the Pentagon. Each of them had been selected because, like Uri Geller, they possessed very high IQs, they exhibited extraordinary psychic abilities, and they'd had early encounters with aliens—or at least that's what Puharich wanted them to believe."

"*Star Kids*—because their powers came from the stars. Now I get it," D.H. says.

Gordon gets it, too. In fact, he gets it on such a deep level that he's having an almost out-of-the-body experience. He remembers walking into his back yard on the pre-dawn morning when the Easter Bunny beat the crap out of him. Only he wasn't beaten up yet. And there wasn't any Easter Bunny. But there *was* a light—an eerie green, laser-like light coming straight down out of the sky in a wide beam that illuminated the center of the patio. It was like something emitted from a B-movie flying saucer. Gordon walked toward the light, as if in a dream, drawn to it like a zombie boy in his fuzzy blue pajama suit. He was scared, but couldn't stop himself. When he stepped into the light, he was jerked right off his feet. In one swift tilt, he found himself floating horizontally in mid-air. Looking skyward, he saw a black hole dilating in the clouds above him like a camera aperture. He felt helpless, terrified. And then the black hole sucked him up.

"This was all taking place at the same time that the adults were learning about remote viewing over at the Stanford Research Institute," Lloyd continues. "Did the CIA have a hand in Puharich's program, too? It's almost a sure bet... but by having the program take place within the confines of Puharich's civilian 'Turkey Farm' the agency created plausible deniability—which they needed. Because if the fine, upstanding citizens of our great but compromised country had found out what was going on there, they almost certainly would have gotten into an uproar. Puharich was experimenting on those children in ways that were appalling and unethical, if not outright criminal."

The next thing Gordon knew, he was strapped to a rolling gurney passing under overhead lamps on adjustable arms—the type usually found in hospital operating rooms. He felt like he was just waking up from anesthesia. Someone roughly grabbed his shoulders and pushed the gurney back with a jolt in the opposite direction from which it had come. Gordon lifted his head and saw a doctor standing at the foot of the gurney.

"He was hypnotizing them, then giving them powerful post-hypnotic commands suggesting that their psychic abilities had an extraterrestrial origin. As a result, during hypnotic regression therapy in later sessions, the Star Kids described alien cities and otherworldly vistas in distant galaxies. They believed they'd been sent from those far-flung civilizations as extraterrestrial ambassadors of good will,

presently disguised in pimply-faced human bodies. Their mission was to rise to positions of prominence and spread throughout the governments of the world, so they could steer human progress and protect the planet from behind the scenes. Now the question is: was Puharich's intent to help the Star Kids retrieve repressed memories and past-life experiences—or was he implanting them with false screen memories and an insidious form of mind control programming?"

The doctor wasn't an alien, as Gordon had expected. Even before he'd walked into the eerie green light, he'd known it had all the markings of an alien abduction. Watching late-night sci-fi movies on Channel 26 had already prepared him for that much, at least. The doctor was Doctor Smiley—although Gordon didn't know him as Doctor Smiley at the time. His regular doctor was still Doctor Brockett. Doctor Smiley told him to go back to sleep.

"The Star Kids program lasted until August of 1978, when Puharich's Turkey Farm burned to the ground. The cause was arson. I've heard two theories about who set the blaze. One suspect was a traumatized Space Kid who told authorities that the aliens had been harassing him."

"We should use that as an excuse at school next week instead of saying the dog ate our homework," D.H. suggests.

Lloyd talks right over him: "Puharich, on the other hand, blamed the CIA. He fled to Mexico after telling friends that he suspected a rogue faction within the agency wanted to quash his research into alternative energy sources. He claimed he'd invented a device for splitting water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen—or *Brown's gas*."

"I've got your Brown's gas right here, buddy," Jimmy says ominously.

Lloyd ignores him as well. "When the Brown's gas was burned in an internal combustion engine—with steam as its only by-product—the energy produced was far greater than the energy expended to split the water molecules in the first place. It was free energy, in other words. Imagine the implications of such a device. It could solve all the world's energy issues. No more burning fossil fuels, no more pollution."

"No more Mexicans riding bicycles!" Jimmy shouts, getting into the spirit of Lloyd's discourse, if not its logic. "They'd all have low-riders powered by water from the mighty *Rio Grande*!"

"You may laugh, but I've been hearing rumors that Puharich recently filed for a patent on the whole set-up and now his vehicle of choice for tooling around Mexico is a customized Winnebago fueled by water from a common garden hose—or in more remote locations, by rain and melted snow."

"They've got snow in Mexico?" Skip asks, baffled. "I've never met a beaner who could ski."

"So why isn't this Puharich *pendejo* a billionaire by now?" Twinker asks while simultaneously jabbing her elbow into Skip's brawny chest.

"The short and relatively insincere answer is that the oil industry has some very powerful lobbyists," Lloyd says. "A more thoughtful answer is that it would mean saying good-bye to our current geopolitical order. Third World countries would be on more of an equal footing with First World countries. A source of low-cost, pollution-free energy would transform every aspect of life on this planet for the better: manufacturing, housing, transportation, the ability to grow food and desalinate water—you name it. The artificial poverty and scarcity being created by the withholding of such technologies would be eliminated. Unfortunately, there are some very rich and powerful people in the world who don't want to see that happen."

Gordon feels like he's just coming out of a light trance. He asks, "Are there really people so selfish that they'd screw-over almost everyone else on the whole planet, just so they can keep making the big bucks? I mean, aren't they already rich enough?"

"The kind of people I'm talking about would jeopardize the welfare of their own children if it meant pulling ahead in some small way. And they're not all Boston Brahmin spooks or international financiers, either. They're policeman, doctors, lawyers, and civil engineers.... There are more of them than you'd ever imagine. You can find them almost anywhere. Even in Kingsburg."

"I kind of knew that already," Gordon says, feeling weary. "I guess I just wanted to hear it from you. Whatever happened to those poor Star Kids, anyway?"

“Most of them are no doubt still involved in black budget operations of one kind or another, whether they’re aware of that fact, or not. Judging by what I’ve seen lately, Puharich’s shadowy overseers were quite impressed with his results. They’ve rolled out an aggressive new program, nationwide, to create more Star Kids—and they’re not just teaching them remote viewing anymore.”

“This is where you come in, Gordon,” Jimmy says. “You’ve been really, *really* bad.”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one who tried to assassinate a hypnotist today in front of about five hundred people.”

“No, but you’ve done worse.”

If a rotting sea monster had just tickled Gordon’s armpits with its decomposing, skeletal fins, he wouldn’t be any less freaked out. “What’s he talking about, Lloyd?” he asks.

“We’ll get to that. Jimmy—*no more*,” Lloyd says sternly. “Not another word.”

“I’m sure it couldn’t’ve been *that* bad, Crash,” Skip says. “I mean, you’re kind of a wimp, after all.”

“A wimp with super-psychic-killer powers,” D.H. reminds Skip.

“He could probably waste *your* ass while he was just scratching his balls,” Jimmy says, taking the side of his oldest friend.

“*Enough!*” Lloyd shouts. “This is no laughing matter. Children are being tortured in this program.”

“They’re *what*—?” Twinker asks.

“Tortured,” Lloyd says. “Someone found out that hypnosis works better when the subject is in a state of dissociation.”

“What’s dissociation?” asks Skip.

“When you’re driving your car and you forget where you’re going and you get caught up in thinking about other things and yet *still* you arrive safely at your destination, without knowing how you did it—that’s dissociation. Everyone experiences it from time-to-time. But what I’m talking about is *extreme* dissociation—when you leave your body because you’re in unbearable pain from an accident, for instance, or when you hide away in a tiny compartment you rarely use inside your mind while, say, you’re being raped.”

Twinker goes deathly still.

“Many of the techniques now used were pioneered by Doctor Ewan Cameron, who picked them up right where the Nazis had left off. Doctor Cameron was a President of the World Psychiatric Association who lived in Albany, New York and commuted to Montreal every week on the CIA’s dime to conduct MKULTRA experiments at McGill University. He died in 1967, but he lives on in infamy for his diabolical techniques of *depatterning* and *psychic driving*. Now—are you sure you’re ready for this?” Lloyd asks Gordon, cocking a plump eyebrow.

“Fire away, Big Man,” Gordon says with a bravado he doesn’t truly feel. “We’ve been listening to your windbag wisdom for hours now. How could this be any worse?”

“If my suspicions are correct, you’ve personally experienced some of the mind control techniques I’m about to describe. Re-stimulating your repressed memories of them might induce an abreaction. In layman’s terms—as I’ve heard your friends so often say—you might ‘freak the fuck out.’”

With an dismissive wave of his hand, Gordon says, “That’s cool... I’ll just let my freak-out flag fly.” He has a ridiculous boner that he’s finding rather distracting. It feels twice its normal size.

“You’re the man, Crash!” Jimmy says, reaching over the seat to slap Gordon a high-five. “Just so you know, when I found out about this stuff I sat down and fuckin’ cried like a teeny-weeny little baby.”

“That’s just so... *pussyfied*,” says D.H., mocking him.

“Shall I begin?” Lloyd asks, sounding as if he’s about to deliver a Thanksgiving Day homily.

“You may begin,” Gordon answers, bowing his head.

“Okay, so... *depatterning* is Doctor Cameron’s term for wiping a person’s mind clean of old thought patterns—even to the point of ridding them of their basic personality and all knowledge of how to function in the world, in some cases. Ostensibly, he was doing this for the benefit of people suffering from severe mental illness who needed their minds rebuilt from the ground up. But in actual practice, his subjects often displayed symptoms no more harmful than mild anxiety or post-partum depression.”

“So how do you depattern someone?” Gordon asks, as if he doesn’t already know.

“In Cameron’s case—working in the late-fifties to mid-sixties—he used LSD and a variety of other new psychoactive drugs in combination with electroconvulsive shock therapy administered twice a day at 30 to 40 times the normal voltage.”

“Jesus,” says Skip. “Talk about a bad trip....”

“He also used a ‘sleep room’ where he put his patients into a drug-induced coma for days and sometimes weeks on end. That’s where the *psychic driving* technique came in. Cameron rigged a speaker under the comatose patient’s pillow that would play taped messages over and over in a constant loop.”

“*RFK must die, RFK must be killed—Robert F. Kennedy must be assassinated...*” D.H. mechanically intones through his cupped palms, evoking the memory of Sirhan Sirhan.

“Doctor Cameron discovered that some of his patients, thus treated, ended up creating multiple personalities, or *alters*. Those alters could then be called up or dismissed at Cameron’s will through the use of hypnosis techniques discovered by his colleague, Doctor George Estabrooks, who once bragged that he could hypnotize any man, ‘without his knowledge or consent,’ into committing acts of treason against the United States. As I’m sure you can guess by now, the CIA was quite thrilled with these findings. The agency took them and ran with them—to further serve the interests of national security, *comprenez-vous?*”

“Do you always speak French when you’re being sarcastic?” Gordon asks Lloyd. He’s about to cream in his pants.

“*Oui, monsieur*. There’s a nationwide network of such doctors now, tucked away out on military bases and in black-budget-funded medical clinics. Their methods have become harsher, their drugs have become more targeted and effective, and the unwilling subjects of their infernal ministrations have become younger—*much* younger. They start out on toddlers now.”

“Why?” Gordon asks. He can barely get the word out.

“Because toddlers can’t explain in any sort of coherent way what’s been done to them—especially if what’s been done is so horrifying that

it nearly beggars belief. Young minds are also more malleable, less apt to crack under the strain of severe mind control programming. Many of the older subjects just can't hold up under the pressure—their wits dissolve and they become useless vegetables. The dissociative states these doctors are aiming for require the infliction of severe trauma. Sometimes they're lucky enough to find their subjects coming into a hospital emergency room seeking treatment for a bad accident or a life-threatening illness. At other times, the trauma is inflicted *deliberately* in staged settings. Often, they'll simulate an alien abduction, using back-engineered extraterrestrial technology—then they'll reinforce the subject's belief in the reality of the abduction with post-hypnotic suggestions. Under special circumstances, they'll conduct a Black Mass and force the subject to participate in the sacrifice of a child to Satan."

"*No way!* I can't believe that!" Skip groans, raising his hands in front of his face in disgust.

"I've seen it happen," says Jimmy matter-of-factly. "I even killed a kid myself once... or at least they made me think I did."

"Satanic Ritual Abuse, they call it," says Lloyd. "It's quite effective. What they especially like about it is that no one would ever believe the story, should one of the subjects ever be unfortunate enough to remember it."

"I *still* can't believe it," Skip says.

"If you'll recall what I told you about the Process Church and the Four Pi cult in this context, and I think you'll find it's a little easier."

"Oh, hell... you're right. I think I'm gonna barf now."

"I did that, too," Jimmy admits.

"*Puss-yy-fied...*" D.H. sings in a stage-whisper, needling him.

Twinkler is still being weirdly quiet, sitting rigidly in Skip's lap.

Jimmy slugs D.H. on the knee. "*Om?*" D.H. yelps. "Why'd you do *that?*"

"I just found out today that I got abused by a bunch of fake Satanists—including *my mom*—and you're making fun of me," Jimmy complains.

"Those Satanists aren't fake," Lloyd says. "They actually believe in what they're doing. They're like the magicians, priests, and shamans of antiquity who understood that a victim's response to trauma could

invoke a mystical experience. And it's true—so far as we know that trauma alters brain chemistry and changes our perceptions of reality. Nowadays that particular response is labeled *dissociation*, but the mystical experience might still be there for the taking. In that regard, the creation of programmable alters could be considered a high sacrament, like the ego-death—or 'Crossing of the Chorozone'—that Aleister Crowley and others of his ilk considered as a prerequisite before they could practice the highest magic."

"More like the *blackest* magic," grumbles Gordon. "They're probably just sucking up peoples' orgone, like those demons Mark David Chapman worked for. You know... food for the Moon."

"Well, there's that possibility, too," Lloyd acknowledges. "But that wouldn't explain quite as well why so many of the people involved in running Project MONARCH have been submitting their own children to it."

At that moment, with a shriek, Twinker tries to hurl herself out of the moving car.

Skip grabs hold of her legs as she scrambles across the Bentley's trunk, looking like Jackie Kennedy in the Dallas motorcade just moments after her husband's brains were blown out. "Let go of me!" Twinker screams, scratching at Skip's face. Skip hangs onto her and drags her back down into the backseat.

A Ford Econoline van whooshes past the Bentley on their left, heading in the opposite direction. There's no doubt in anyone's mind that it would have run Twinker over if she'd managed to launch herself from the trunk. Skip wraps his arms around her and hugs her tight so she can't do any more harm. Twinker goes limp then, muttering through the hair covering her face, "I just wanna die..." Then she passes out.

Ignoring the panicky gabble in the backseat that follows, Lloyd calmly turns to Gordon and inquires: "Did you know that Twinker had an alter personality programmed to self-destruct if she recalled her involvement in Project MONARCH?"

"I didn't know it was called Project MONARCH, but yeah... I knew the rest," Gordon admits.

"I suspected as much. She'll be fine now," Lloyd says, looking grim. "There's a post-hypnotic suggestion always built-in to that

program that sends her into an artificial coma if her suicide attempt is thwarted—a fail-safe method to prevent her from talking. We'll be able to wake her once we get her back to Esalen. But you should have told me. We could have avoided that little incident."

"I'm sorry," Gordon says, sensing how betrayed Lloyd must feel.

"Had I known, I wouldn't have allowed Twinker to make the decision that's put us out here on the road at night, when it's not safe. We should head back now. Let's start looking for a turn-out."

"Look—I know you're mad at me," says Gordon, desperate to apologize, "but I wasn't sure I could trust you." *That's not entirely true.* "I mean, I trusted you enough for me, but I thought I'd better be a hundred percent sure before I trusted you with Twinker. Besides, how did you know that *my* self-destruct programming wouldn't kick in once you started explaining Project MONARCH?"

Lloyd's shoulders relax as he grins in forgiveness. "I noticed that frisky tent-pole in your pants right after Jimmy mentioned the code-name MONARCH for the first time. That's a distinctive programming flaw of the incompetent Doctor Smiley, who happens to be a pedophile—or didn't you know that?"

"I had no idea," Gordon says. *But that would explain a lot,* he thinks.

"When Jimmy came to me after the shooting incident, I gave him a post-hypnotic suggestion to tide him over until we got to Esalen, so I knew he'd be all right. My friend Doctor Lemingeller has taught me a number of tricks over the years.... Initially, I was *extremely* concerned about you—especially after hearing what Jimmy had to say—but then, after I discerned that Doctor Smiley had been your programmer, I knew you'd be fine. A spastic fit of masturbation was likely to be the worst outcome."

"I never touch myself there. That's *dirty*," Gordon jokes.

"Has it occurred to you that your narcolepsy episodes might also be the result of Doctor Smiley's less-than-stellar mind control programming?" Lloyd asks him. "The old fail-safe coma response could be kicking in whenever you get overly excited. It's just a thought.... You really need to have Doctor Felix give you a thorough going-over so you can get all that *merde* out of your system."

“How come you know so much about all this stuff?” Gordon asks him.

“As I’ve told you before, I’m not only the insurance man for the remote viewing program at SRI International, I’m also a client. Actually, I’m sort of the bagman for a lot of these so-called ‘black budget’ programs. Millions of dollars pass through my company each month on their way to clandestine operations—compliments of my bogus insurance pay-offs. At least 30 *billion* U.S. dollars gets passed around that way every year through people like me. I skim a bit off the top, then I make a hobby out of watching where the rest of my money goes—even though it’s not really mine.”

“But it’s taxpayers’ money, right?”

“Right. My thinking exactly...” says Lloyd. “I’m just a concerned citizen who wants to know how his tax dollars are spent.”

“That money gets spent in some really weird ways.”

“Tell me about it, brother.”

There’s a full moon rising out over the ocean, casting its broken reflection in a jittery path of light across the dark water, hundreds of feet below. Lloyd spies a turnout and pulls in, making a gravel-crunching U-turn. They sit for a moment with the Bentley’s motor warmly purring, listening to the distant crash of the surf and looking up through the almost infinitely vast and cold distances of outer space to gape at the winking stars.

The world seems hushed until Skip asks, almost in a whisper: “Lloyd, do you think Twinker will be okay?”

“She’ll be fine,” Lloyd says, engaging the Bentley’s transmission. He pulls onto the empty highway slinging gravel, headed back through the bracing redwood-scented darkness toward Esalen. “She’s a champion, that girl of yours... a true world-beater. Whatever she’s been through, she’ll come out of it on the Other Side stronger and more loving than ever. Don’t you worry.”

“Hey, Gordon... I guess I kind of owe you an apology,” Jimmy says ruefully. “I just remembered: after I stuck a knife in that kid at the Black Mass, they tried to get me to go after you, too.”

“Was that when you almost broke my neck by dropping me out of your damn tree house?”

Jimmy hunches his shoulders. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"No biggie."

Lloyd interjects: "It's more likely they just wanted Gordon maimed, so Doctor Smiley could get another crack at doing some deep programming."

"Dang, it must've sucked to be you, Crash," D.H. jokes.

Gordon jokes back at him, "It kind of makes me wonder if Jimmy had something to do with that CB antenna that ripped through your scrotum."

"That wasn't me!" Jimmy squeaks. "I swear!"

Skip sincerely asks: "Do you think my mom fucking me was part of Project MONARCH, too?"

"It's possible," Lloyd answers, "except that you show none of the tics of mind control programming. If they got to you, Skip, they went deep.... But I rather suspect your nubile mother was simply horny."

"I wish she'd been horny for me instead," Jimmy gripes.

"What I don't get is why our parents signed us up for this Project MONARCH deal, if they knew we'd be tortured," says Gordon. "I mean, I know Twinker's asshole dad was kind of blackmailed into it, but why did our *moms* do it? It's not like they got rich or anything."

"Believe me, your fathers were in on it, too. If anything, they're even more culpable," Lloyd says. "And to answer your question, the medico-military-occult complex is a source for important business contacts and esoteric knowledge, as well as torture. They also like to keep things going on an intergenerational basis, similar to the legacy admissions policy at Yale—or entrée to Skull and Bones. Ergo, Twinker's father was likely abused in one of their black-ops programs as a child (while also reaping certain benefits), and therefore he thinks it's perfectly fine to abuse his own children, and so on."

"My dad has some pretty fucked-up stories from when he was a kid, that's for sure," says Jimmy.

"I know those stories first-hand," Lloyd says. "I was there."

"So how come they didn't go after *you*?" Gordon asks.

"Who's to say they didn't?" Lloyd responds. "What you have to understand is that mind control programming is still an imperfect science. The CIA would love to be able to create one of these so-called

‘Manchurian Candidates’ in less than an hour—and they’re closer to that goal than ever—but with some people it just doesn’t take.”

“What makes you so fucking special?” Jimmy asks.

“I’m far from special,” Lloyd says. “However, I would humbly suggest that the level of a person’s spiritual knowledge and attainments is the ultimate deciding factor in a mind control program’s outcome. The higher you can fly on the astral plane, the less likely they are to ensnare you. And those higher spiritual levels are open to everyone.”

“So being able to meditate and do lucid dreaming would help, right?”

“Yes, Gordon, those skills are absolutely essential. You, of all people, should know...” Lloyd says. “Remote viewing, precognition, telekinesis—all of those abilities depend on your astral body being able to shuttle between the Explicate and the Implicate Order. There’s a continuum between our material realm and the astral realm, which lies just beyond the Implicate Order. Within that continuum, astral light phases into a semi-materialized quantum energy field—or the Implicate Order—and then into the Explicate Order’s seemingly solid, three-dimensional forms. Astral light is the foundation of the Implicate Order, the working stuff of the One Mind. Unlike electromagnetic light, it’s completely non-local—similar in concept to Ingo Swann’s Matrix—so the entire universe is holographically folded within it at each and every point.”

“I don’t get it,” says Skip. “Can you put that in plain English?”

“Yeah,” says D.H., “you might as well be speaking in tongues.”

“Let me come at it from another angle then....” Lloyd tries again: “Astral light resides in ideal forms emanating from the One Mind—the universal consciousness we all share with every speck of matter in the universe, which some people call God. You might think of astral light as the blueprint for the universe, a blueprint capable of being changed by directed thought from within the One Mind. It’s really no different than your astral body during lucid dreaming, which serves as a blueprint for *you*—but it’s the unbounded idea of you, with your mind transcendent and at play in the *Bardo*. As opposed the space-and-time-constrained physical you, with a brain that’s just three pounds of electrified pâté inside your skull.”

“*Yum!*” says D.H..

“You lost me again,” says Skip, sounding exasperated.

“Maybe I can help,” Gordon says. “Tell me if this is right, Lloyd.... Sometimes, during a lucid dream, I’ll see things that I’m told will happen three or four days in the future. When those things happen in real life, just like I was shown in my dream, I’m always blown away. But maybe that happens because my astral body is non-local, so it can slip off our normal space-time track and go cruising around eternity—or what Lloyd is calling the One Mind’s holographic blueprint—where everything that’s going to happen has already happened. The trick, for me, is remembering it and bringing it back.”

“That’s exactly right,” Lloyd beams, “although there are countless possibilities beyond just knowing the future.”

“Yeah, but at least *that* I can understand,” Skip says, triumphant and relieved. “That’s pretty cool. Just think if you could play the stock market that way.”

“I know for a fact that some men do,” Lloyd says. “We ponder over the inequities of wealth distribution in this world... well, there’s one of the reasons for it.”

“But I thought you had to be on a high spiritual level to do this astral travel stuff. Like Gandhi or something,” D.H. quibbles.

“The acquisition of wealth isn’t intrinsically evil. It depends on your motives for acquiring it and what you actually do with it. Having said that, there’s also the Left-Hand Path of spiritual attainment—the path that Aleister Crowley and others of his ilk have chosen to follow. It’s the ‘Dark Side of the Force,’ so to speak.”

“Like what they taught us in Project MONARCH,” says Gordon, as a terrible understanding dawns in him.

Lloyd gives him a sad smile. “It’s hard to reconcile the term ‘psychic killer’ with the image of an airy-fairy, sandal-wearing bodhisattva, isn’t it?”

“Oh fuck....”

“You’ve been bad, Gordon,” Jimmy razzes him. “*Real* bad.”

“*¡Silencio!*” Lloyd shouts. He turns in his seat and swats Jimmy across the top of his unruly brown hair. Surprised but unhurt, Jimmy slouches lower in the backseat, muttering to himself.

“You’ve done nothing wrong,” Lloyd tries to reassure Gordon. “Nothing that you weren’t unknowingly programmed to do, that is.... You, my friend, are the weapon, and it’s not the weapon that does the killing—it’s the hard heart that pulls the trigger.”

“Now you’re *really* freaking me the fuck out,” says Gordon. He’s pretty sure he’s hyperventilating.

“What the hell did he do?” Skip whispers. D.H. just shrugs his shoulders while Jimmy grumbles: “I can’t tell you.”

“The CIA has been searching for ways to create a psychic killer since at least the early fifties, when Andrija Puharich came on the scene. Think of how convenient a psychic killer would have been when they were trying to assassinate Fidel Castro. That whole Bay of Pigs fiasco could have been avoided.”

“Operation ZAPATA!” D.H. says with a Zorro-like flourish, recalling the CIA’s codename for the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

“A nod to the Zapata Off-Shore Drilling Company,” Lloyd relates, “owned by our illustrious Vice President, George H.W. Bush. It was Bush who thoughtfully supplied an offshore oil platform for use as a staging area during that botched operation, some forty miles north of Cuba. And it was an operations chief at the CIA’s JM/WAVE Miami station, David Sanchez Morales, who’d trained Operation ZAPATA’s Cuban exiles to run the sabotage raids on Castro—only to watch them get slaughtered after President Kennedy curtailed their air support at the last-minute. I’m talking about *the same* David Morales who was later implicated in the assassinations of both Kennedys, and who conveniently died just a few weeks before he was scheduled to testify in front of the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The Cubans knew him as *El Gordo*—The Fat One—and he’d been properly feared as the CIA’s top assassin in Latin America. For all we know, he may have had that same role in the good old U.S. of A as well.”

“You’re just full of fun facts, aren’t you?” Gordon says, feeling sullen now that the fear Lloyd had put into him is subsiding.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to get sidetracked...” Lloyd says, “although I find it quite fascinating that a few FBI memos are floating around that make note of George Bush being in Dallas on the day Kennedy was shot. Mind control programming was in its gangly adolescence back then. The CIA could manage a patsy like Lee Harvey Oswald, but it

would be several more years before they were confident enough to deploy an amnesiac mind-controlled shooter like Sirhan Sirhan—and the creation of full-blown psychic killers takes us right up to the present day.”

“You keep telling me that I’m one, but I don’t even know what a psychic killer does, really,” Gordon complains. “I wish someone would clue me in.”

“A psychic killer can pinpoint any human target, anywhere in the world, through remote viewing, and then psychically manipulate that target’s mental, emotional, and/or physical health, through remote influencing.”

“So I can supposedly kill people by remote influencing.”

“In theory, yes,” Lloyd says. “In practice, it’s not quite that simple. Let’s say, for example, you were assigned to kill the Ayatollah Khomeini—or his CIA-sponsored rival, Saddam Hussein—in a bid to end the current Iran-Iraq War. First off, it’s one of your alters that has been programmed as a psychic killer, not your core personality—the *you* that I’m talking to—so they’d have to bring you in or give you a trigger command to reboot you, so to speak.... Then they’d likely put you in an isolation tank so you could enter a deep state of meditation. Remote viewing is much the same as astral travel during a lucid dream—it’s easily interrupted—so they’d want to keep you tucked away.”

“Would they give him drugs?” D.H. asks. “Like John Lilly with his LSD?”

“It depends on the individual, but there *are* certain drugs that enhance psychic abilities, as we’ve already established. So yes, Gordon could be tripping his brains out while he’s in there looking for Saddam Hussein.”

“Or Khomeini,” Jimmy says, rooting for Iraq.

“Or Khomeini.... Once Gordon has locked onto his target, he’ll have no choice but to carry out the assassination plan. He might have been commanded to remotely rupture the aorta of Khomeini’s heart, for instance. But here’s the rub: Whatever damage Gordon inflicts, the same damage will also afflict him. It’s sort of spiritual payback—*Instant Karma*, in the words of John Lennon—and there’s no getting around it. Which would be fine if the CIA considered psychic killers dispensable,

but people with those abilities are extremely hard to find and even harder to mind-control, so the actual psychic killers are quite rare. There's fewer than a dozen, that I know of, in the entire world."

"Way to go, Gordon," D.H. congratulates him. "That's like getting a perfect 1600 on your SATs."

"What they've come up with instead," Lloyd continues, "is a roundabout way of killing the target without also killing the psychic killer. They find a physical weakness in the target's body that the psychic killer's body can withstand. In Gordon's case, since he already has asthma, he knows and can project all of the symptoms leading up to a life-threatening asthma attack. So what his handlers do is stock up on asthma medication and then they put Gordon into an isolation tank with the post-hypnotic command to give the Ayatollah an absolutely lung-crushing case of bronchial spasms. After Gordon executes that command and is fished out of the tank, he'll be barely breathing—but his team will instantly provide him with the right medicine and put him on life support, if necessary. Meanwhile, over in Iran, the old Ayatollah might not be so lucky."

"*Veny tricky...*" says D.H., pulling on an invisible mustache and sounding like Charlie Chan—or their absent friend, Hideous Nakamatsu.

"I'm not sure if this technique has ever been successfully deployed against human beings," Lloyd says, "but I *do* know for a fact that it's been used with resounding success against extraterrestrials."

"You're fuckin' kidding me!" Gordon says. He doesn't know why, exactly, but he's appalled—and *embarrassed*. "I've been giving aliens asthma attacks?"

"There's a reason why Area 51 is nicknamed 'Dreamland,'" Lloyd hints, "and it's more subtle than you might at first think. It has to do with the recovered alien technology they're studying there. They get that alien technology these days by using psychic killers to murder or incapacitate the alien pilots of UFOs."

"I'd never do that," Gordon protests. "That's just fucked up and wrong."

"No way! What are you saying, Crash? That's so *cool*!" Jimmy laughs.

“Screw those Nude Dudes on the Moon!” Skip hoots.

“Wheeze, you fuckin’ bug-eyed muthafucka! Wheeze!” D.H. pantomimes Gordon’s less-than-heroic-looking psychic efforts on behalf of the CIA.

“We tend to have the home court advantage when it comes to alien encounters,” Lloyd says. “That’s why UFOs rarely ever fully materialize and leave behind physical evidence. Their occupants have mastered a non-local technology that interfaces with consciousness and enables them to travel up and down the astral-material continuum that I was telling you about earlier. Which explains why UFOs are sometimes caught on radar traveling at outrageous speeds and then—*bing!*—they come to a full stop and head off at a 90-degree angle. The G-forces at work during that sort of stunt would destroy any *physical* aircraft and its passengers, but it’s entirely possible for a UFO in astral, or semi-materialized form. They’re more like a holographic projection in that state—or like figures in a lucid dream—and that’s where they like to stay while they’re visiting Earth. It’s safer for them there. Or at least it was until the psychic warriors like Gordon came along.”

Doing a breathy Scarlett O’Hara, Skip sighs, *“My hero!”*

“Nearly all of the remote-viewers at SRI International and in Project GRILL FLAME have seen UFOs hovering over Nike missile bases, flitting around Top Secret military installations, and trailing after nuclear submarines,” Lloyd says. “But there was never anything they could do about it until recently. Now someone like Gordon can zero in on the UFO occupants at their level on the astral-material continuum and bring them down to a fully materialized state, where they’re vulnerable. Then it’s simply a matter of choking off their air supply with an asthma attack, or rendering them incapacitated with a massive case of Montezuma’s Revenge—which I understand is none too pleasant for the equally-afflicted psychic warrior inside the isolation tank.... The UFO subsequently crashes and a special Air Force team flies out to pick up the remains.”

“That’s harsh,” says Gordon, shaking his head.

“What’s harsh?” D.H. asks him. “Crashing a UFO and killing a bunch of dinky gray ass-probing aliens, or having to float around in an isolation tank filled up with your own liquefied poo?”

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

"It's not all that much worse than my uncle seeing snakes and shitting his pants with shaman's juice," Jimmy says merrily.

As Jimmy, Skip, and D.H. laugh in the backseat, Lloyd turns to Gordon and says to him in confidence: "I've been meaning to ask you, Gordon... did something similar happen with your father?"

"My dad? What do you mean?"

"Your father's plane crash. You weren't mad at him, were you?"

A heavy invisible weight descends along Gordon's arms and shoulders. It feels just like the lead blanket that Doctor Smiley's assistants covered him with after he'd been laid out on the X-ray table. As he recalls the circumstances of his father's plane crash, Gordon thinks, *Was I mad at my Dad that day?*

Sure... he answers himself, but I remember forgiving him.

"It's possible you might have triggered your psychic killer alter without even realizing it. It could have happened subconsciously."

Did I? Was I that angry? Just because he called me asinine? And a jackass. And an ass-checked ding-a-ling. And then he went flying with Mike instead of me....

The heaviness descends along Gordon's legs and inches up the back of his spine, toward his brain. He tries to lift his hands, but he finds they've been magnetically melded to his knees.

"I didn't mean to insinuate anything," Lloyd backpedals. "I just thought that if you knew how your father, in a sense, traded a piece of your soul to Arnie Andersen in exchange for a cut of Arnie's business, well... let's just say it made *me* see red, when I found out what Project MONARCH had done to you and Jimmy."

But I loved my dad! (I think...).

"Arnie was my good friend, but now I doubt I'll ever speak to him again."

My dad traded me to Arnie Andersen? How did I know that? Or did I? Whatever it was that happened that day—oh man, I was pissed!

"Gordon? Is something wrong?"

Gordon's entire body is shuddering in the same way that his father's old green Pinto used to shudder whenever it was pushed past the legal speed limit. Convulsing like the first big trout he hooked at Dinkey Creek, Gordon swims through the air into Lloyd's flabby arms,

compromising his steering. Lloyd tries to push him away, but Gordon's upper torso is too heavy. He's already sunk deep into the abyss of narcolepsy.

The Bentley is making a sweeping left turn along a high ocean cliff as all of this is happening. It hits the guardrail—

—and glances off. Lloyd regains control of the steering wheel and stops the car.

SAFE....

“Shit! What happened?” Jimmy asks. He hops up and slides over and down the smooth back of the Bentley's trunk to get out and inspect the damage.

Lloyd gets out, too. He goes around to the front of the car to take a look at the right fender. He squats, then announces: “It's a bit crumpled, but drive-able.”

“Did Gordon pass out?” D.H. asks.

“Two down,” Skip says, patting Twinker, still slumped in his lap. “Only one more to go.”

“Jimmy, what's it gonna take to set you off?” D.H. yells good-naturedly, looking at him through the windshield.

Jimmy's eyes widen in horror, as do Lloyd's. An instant later, the inside of the windshield goes white with the reflection of otherworldly headlights.

D.H. and Skip turn around in the backseat just in time to see a black, early-sixties Lincoln Continental furiously bearing down on them.



EPILOGUE

*Ethos Anthropos
Daimon*

WE (THE INDIVISIBLE DIVINITY THAT WORKS IN US) HAVE DREAMED THE WORLD. WE HAVE DREAMED IT RESISTANT, MYSTERIOUS, VISIBLE, UBIQUITOUS IN SPACE AND FIRM IN TIME, BUT WE HAVE ALLOWED SLIGHT, AND ETERNAL, BITS OF THE IRRATIONAL TO FORM PART OF ITS ARCHITECTURE SO AS TO KNOW THAT IT IS FALSE.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES



I guess you'd call that a cliffhanger... although when the Men in Black rammed into Lloyd's Bentley they sent it through the guardrail and over the cliff with no hanging whatsoever. Skip and D.H. were rocked by the horrid jolt of the collision, then they saw the sky tilt and felt a rapidly accelerating momentum as the Bentley plummeted toward the sea. A sensation beyond even panic blazed through them as the wind roared in their ears and their butts drifted free of the Bentley's backseat. They knew they were about to die.

Skip hung on tight to Twinker, while D.H. grabbed the headrest in front of him, where Gordon remained slumped, dreaming away. Time seemed to telescope and slow way down. Then, with a crinkley pop—like bubble wrap being torn off a package—Skip and D.H. found themselves floating outside their bodies. An instant later, the Bentley smashed below them into the cradle formed by two gnarled, rust-colored boulders jutting above the foaming waves.

D.H. observed with an astonishing lack of concern that his body had been decapitated upon impact—guillotined on the Bentley's shattered windshield.

(D.H.: "Look, Ma: no head!")

Once you're on the Other Side, almost all communication happens via telepathy (which I'll indicate by using parenthesis). I'm sure you'll figure it out.

(Skip: "What just happened to us?")

(D.H.: "We just got wasted, obviously.")

Skip watched, unperturbed, as his body—along with Twinker's—sunk under the cold green waves and drowned. A few seconds later, Twinker flung herself up from the sea and joined them in the air above the wrecked Bentley.

(Twinker: "¡Hola, guys! Pretty weird, huh?")

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

(S.: “Fuckin’ freaky....”) Skip gave Twinker a big astral hug. He was starting to remember situations no less freaky that he’d been in before. This wasn’t his first time being dead.

It wasn’t the first time for any of them. In fact, they’d planned to die that way long before they were even born, knowing that if the three of them died together they’d have a better chance of remembering their lives on Earth—and thus a better chance of helping those they left behind once they crossed to the Other Side.

(T.: “Where’s Gordon?”)

(S.: “He’s still down in the car. I don’t think he’s dead yet. But his body’s pretty banged up. He could show up anytime.”)

(D.H.: “Gordon’s smart enough to heal himself, if he wants to go on living.”)

(T.: “But he has to choose.”) Twinker drifted down to take a closer look at him. (“He’ll do whatever feels right.”)

Gordon’s body was in bad shape. He was curled up under the dash of Lloyd’s Bentley, broken and bleeding all over the place. Waves were slapping around the two rusty boulders, slopping their froth over the smashed car doors. Seawater was pooling on the floorboards, mixing with Gordon’s blood. If he didn’t just bleed out, there was a good chance he’d eventually drown.

(T.: “He’s not in his body right now. I can feel it.”)

(S.: “Maybe he’s still up on the cliff with Jimmy and Lloyd.”)

So they went to find out.

D.H. was doing loop-de-loops on the way up. (D.H.: “God, I forgot how much I love not having a body!”)

(S.: “I kind of liked mine. It seems a shame to just leave it behind like that.”)

(T.: “It’s just food for the little fishies now. Get used to it, stud.”)

Up on the cliff, Lloyd and Jimmy were being forced at gunpoint into the Men in Black’s battered Lincoln. Lloyd was swearing at them: “You Lam imbeciles have no idea who you’re dealing with! If you harm even a single hair on that already traumatized boy’s head, the hammer of cosmic justice will come down and your filthy black suits will be transformed into flaming shrouds!”

(D.H.: “He kind of stole that line from a letter that Hunter S. Thompson once wrote to Tom Wolfe in Italy.”) D.H. had also forgotten how much he loved being omniscient.

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(T.: “It’s kind of hard to be original when an interdimensional alien is pointing a gun at you.”) Twinker’s perspective from the Other Side was making her inclined to cut Lloyd some slack. She hovered in the air just a few feet above Lloyd’s head, staring down into the weave of his woeful toupee as he was rudely shoved into the back of the Lincoln. He met her invisible stare with a peevish squint just before the suicide door slammed shut on him.

The stout, triple-chinned Asian-featured man with the bowler hat hustled Jimmy into the backseat on the other side of the car, then he and the emaciated Egyptian-looking man with the Salvador Dali mustache got into the front of the Lincoln and it sped off down the road toward Esalen. D.H., Skip, and Twinker chose not to follow it. A tunnel had opened up alongside the highway and they knew they were supposed to go through it.

At the far end of the tunnel there was a light that grew brighter as Skip, Twinker, and D.H. went inside the tunnel and drifted toward it. The Light seemed to welcome them. It made them feel at peace. It also made them feel more loved—more profoundly, joyfully loved—than they’d ever felt at any point during their lives on Earth.

When they stepped into The Light it was brighter than anything they’d ever seen, but it didn’t hurt their eyes. Other beings of Light gathered around the tunnel’s exit and greeted them. It was like a family reunion without the usual dysfunctional family rivalries and screwed-up psychological undercurrents. There was a joy and gladness that was completely unfaked. After a while (remember: there’s no time on the Other Side—it could have been seconds, it could have been weeks...), Skip, Twinker, and D.H. were led off in separate directions to go have their Life Reviews.

Meanwhile, at the same timeless time in another part of eternity (which is really all just the same time and place, when you get right down to it), Gordon was about to have a Life Review of his own. His would be slightly different, however, because Gordon was in a Divine Coma and it hadn’t been decided yet whether he was going to live or die. So he was in the company of just two very special beings of Light: his daimon and his True Self—or Immortal Twin.

To his astonishment (and mine), Gordon had just found out that his daimon was his Future Self, his next incarnation—Gordon 2.0—who had been administering dreams and visions and the occasional Easter Bunny ass-kicking to Gordon 1.0 throughout his life. Using those techniques, the daimon had subtly sculpted the trajectory of Gordon’s soul-experiences and

lent him an astral guiding hand through a totally bizarre time-loop of paradoxical self-help.

Let me take a shot at explaining how that works.... At the end of each of Gordon's incarnations (he had other names, obviously, but let's not make this too complicated), Gordon's True Self accumulates all of the soul-experiences that a spirit up in heaven finds useful (or "enlightening," to make a crappy pun...). At some point, after a certain level of soul-experience has been accumulated, the True Self becomes capable of splitting itself off into a daimon. Like I've explained before, a daimon is sort of an advanced soul, or tutelary spirit, that's wise enough and skillful enough to interact with both Gordon's True Self in heaven and Gordon's soul while it's incarnated in a body on Earth. But here's the part I didn't know: after the body that housed Gordon's soul has died, the daimon incarnates in the next body, in a kind of spiritual leapfrogging.

I know... it's kind of confusing. But basically, it goes like this: when Gordon 1.0 dies, his soul-experiences are merged with his Immortal Twin, who then splits off into a more refined daimon to watch over Gordon 1.0's daimon—who now, as Gordon 2.0, is taking Gordon 1.0's place on Earth.

So it's just like old Heraclitus said: "Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals, the one living the other's death and dying the other's life." And now you can see why a daimon is so concerned with a soul's progress: if the soul hasn't made any progress by the end of its life on Earth, it's the daimon's sorry ass that has to deal with all the karmic fallout in the next incarnation.

Another consequence of this set-up was that when the Men in Black sent Gordon and those guys over the cliff, Gordon's daimon was compelled to drop by to see if it was time to switch places with him. It was up to Gordon to choose. But before he could make that choice, he had to have a Life Review.

(Gordon's True Self: "First we'll take you out.")

(Gordon's Daimon: "Then we'll show you how to go back in.")

Out where? Gordon wondered. Then, in an instant, he knew. He was outside the Matrix of his own life, looking in. He'd slipped off the space-time grid. Hell, he wasn't even anywhere in the astral-material continuum anymore. He was looking down at the entirety of his own life as holomovement-encoded crystal growing out of an information fluid suspended in five-dimensional space.

Don't ask me to draw you a picture... there's no way.

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As Gordon's perspective scaled back, he saw billions and billions of crystals just like his, all growing in the same information fluid. Each crystal was a sort of chrysalis for a soul's experiences that unfolded over time. He understood then that what he was seeing was the nursery of his known universe, infinite yet somehow bounded. That cluster of crystal spires toward the center was midtown Manhattan. Over there was Tokyo, Paris, Cairo, and so on. Different layers of crystals revealed the Dark Ages, the time of the American Revolution, the Late Cretaceous, the Pre-Cambrian.... It was all there: everything that had ever been, or would ever be.

All the times and places and people merged together as Gordon shifted his focus. He saw polar bears chasing reindeer through thick snowdrifts mottled by the swimming shadows from an overhead school of hammerhead sharks. He saw a posse of cowboys lassoing a spiky-tailed stegosaurus on a Wyoming prairie. He saw a giant red octopus squirting billowy clouds of violet-black ink into the path of an oncoming steam train. He saw bristly orange-haired hyenas wearing tailored chalk-striped suits and white spats, sitting for tea in the parlor of a Victorian whorehouse.

Pulling back even further, Gordon saw the Lam and other interdimensional aliens and angels (some of them benevolent, others quite the opposite), all of them skittering around the edges of the universe nursery like persistent gnats, trying to find a way in. And then, with his back all the way up against the wall of eternity, Gordon saw everything in the known universe blending into one infinitely intelligent being—like a boatload of salt dissolving in a sentient sea.

(G.D.: "Kind of cool, huh?")

(Gordon: "Um, yeah... but it's a little hard to take in all at once.")

Zooming back in on his own holomovement-encoded crystal to experiment with this new way of seeing, Gordon saw himself as a six-year-old in a scorch-marked pajama suit ascending the hokey green tractor beam of an old-fashioned-looking flying saucer. ("Wait a second... was that real?") Over there, in another corner, his thirteen-year-old self was bent over one of Mal's Hustler centerfolds, masturbating like a fiend. Shifting his perspective, he saw those two scenes overlap, and observed even more scenes seeping in-between them. Somewhere in there (it was kind of blurry), he was a mod werewolf on Halloween buying an armload of pineapples for Jimmy's piña coladas. There he was falling out of Jimmy's tree house (again and again, for all of eternity.... Ouch!). And there he was bleeding to death on the

floorboards of Lloyd's smashed Bentley, seawater lapping at his nostrils. Was it already too late to go back?

Apparently not. His True Self was telling him: ("This is how we grow. Would you like to see your probable future?")

(G.: "My future? Sure, that'd be a trip....") But at the same time, Gordon was reminded of a line from Rilke: "This is how he grows, by being defeated decisively by constantly greater beings."

(G.D.: "We encourage you to read poetry. A good poem works on many different levels, as we do.")

(G.T.S.: "Dylan may be more appropriate to your situation than Rilke: '...in the end he won the war after losing every battle.'")

(G.: "I can't believe my True Self just quoted Bob Dylan!")

(G.T.S.: "Of course... 'Idiot Wind.' What did you expect? I'm you, after all... along with all your other selves, both past and future.")

(G.D.: "Here's your past. And your future, if you choose it.")

A blank screen made of light about thirty feet high and more than twice as wide popped up in front of Gordon. Curved around him, actually, like the wall of a coliseum. And then it enveloped him, like the scenery of a lucid dream.

The screen started projecting a rapid-fire series of images that came and went almost too fast for Gordon to consciously register anything. But soon he realized what he was being shown: it was every single moment of his life, from birth onward, flashing before his eyes out-of-sequence.

Somehow, his life started to make more sense to him, viewing it that way. He started to see the hidden connections, how everything and everyone was interlinked. Within each passing scene, he became aware of the feelings and hidden motivations of everyone sharing the space with him. He found he could even watch the scene from their viewpoint, or slow the scene down to something like real-time and lightly re-inhabit his body, if something interested him. The screen was a direct portal to the holomovement-encoded crystal that was his life in a five-dimensional cock-eyed universe. (G.D.: "This is how you go back in....") Making the most of those multiple viewpoints, Gordon quickly learned more than he ever thought he'd want to know about how other people saw him.

That knowledge filled him with a stunning sorrow.

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He saw how he had betrayed others, and how he had been betrayed. He saw how he had misjudged, misunderstood, or just misspoken—often with appalling consequences. He saw all the times he had failed other people, and all the times he had failed himself. But perhaps the worst of it was seeing all the moments when someone needed something from him that he could have given freely, but he chose not to, for whatever the reason.... In most of those moments, what that someone had needed was love.

Gordon realized how truly crappy he'd been at loving.

(G.: "God, I really fucked up....")

(G.D.: "You were supposed to fuck up. That's how you learn.")

(G.T.S.: "This is why we incarnate in the world and in time. This is how we grow—how love grows. The Kingdom of Light can't exist without love.")

This is getting kind of sappy... Gordon thought to himself.

(G.T.S.: "I heard that.")

Telepathy takes some getting used to.

The Life Review rolled along, in full-on Evil-Dipshit-Gordon-mode now. Gordon saw himself as a self-righteous child, a kicker of pigeons. He saw that, yes, his mother was a piece of work—always primed to go off on a rage-spewing tirade or a fit of bitchy self-esteem bashing. But he also saw that she could have been mollified—maybe even turned into a caring parent—if he'd been brave enough to love her as a child. He'd had it in his soul; he just hadn't shown it to her—because, frankly, she scared the crap out of him.

With his father, the situation had been almost worse. They were always playing "¿Quién es más macho?" Who can be the most like James Bond? Who can show the least amount of emotion? Who can put on the best face of indifference? Of course, his father always won, but Gordon shouldn't have even been in the game. He should have shown his father a son's love.

Gordon was so sad he started to telepathically howl.

The light from Gordon's daimon and his True Self grew brighter then, until he could see and feel nothing else. He was enveloped in The Light. It was All-Knowing, All-Loving, and All-Forgiving. It cleansed him of his idiocies and ugly habits. It absolved him of all sins. He was reminded that the word sin just means "missing the mark"—or failing to love the True God, who is everywhere at every moment, although often hidden. In the future (wherever that might be), Gordon would try to aim better.

CRASH GORDON AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINGSBURG

His daimon then showed Gordon how to follow the currents in the information fluid that was swirling around and through the crystal of his life. The first thing that Gordon wanted to find out was if he had somehow caused his father's plane crash. His daimon helped him find the airport hangar where Mal was doing his pre-flight check on the day the crash occurred. Gordon took over from there....

He saw that Mal was so self-consciously consumed with showing-off in front of Mike Shriver that he forgot to check the fuel levels in the Cessna's wing tanks. They were almost empty. After the plane took off, it ran out of gas somewhere above Kingsburg. The prop started to stutter, but Mal tried not to show his concern (again, for Mike's benefit). He decided to make a showy dead-stick landing on the street out in front of his house. But Mal had misjudged... the plane lost altitude too fast and its lower wing clipped the phone pole wires as he was making his approach. Gordon had seen the rest from the street below.

It wasn't his fault. End of story.

Some currents of information brought peace and understanding, but Gordon soon found other currents in the information fluid running through his life that were every bit as strange and dark as any conspiracy theories Lloyd had ever divulged. For example, he saw that his father had played on the same high school basketball team as the future Olympic decathlon winner, Rafer Johnson. Rafer Johnson and the famous defensive linebacker, Rosey Grier, had been Robert Kennedy's personal bodyguards at the Ambassador Hotel on the night that Kennedy was assassinated. Rafer Johnson had actually seen the person who fired the fatal bullet, but he couldn't talk about it (it was just who Gordon thought). The assassin, of course, hadn't been acting alone....

At that point Gordon let the information current run off into the branching darkness. (Oh... except for a flash upstream where he learned that Rafer Johnson would be playing a role in his not-too-distant future as a DEA agent in a James Bond movie called Licence To Kill. Talk about weird symmetry.... That would make him Kingsburg's second hometown movie star, after Slim Pickens, who rode an H-bomb out of a bomber bay like it was a bucking bronco at the end of Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove.)

Picking up again at an earlier branch, Gordon saw that right after his Grandpa Milt had died, sibling rivalry of an almost kill-or-be-killed nature

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*had inspired Gordon's Uncle Gerald to start embezzling more than his fair share of the profits from **Swannson Lumber, Inc.** Mal had retaliated by making a business deal with Arnie Andersen for a tidy share of Arnie's lumberyard profits (with unfortunate consequences for Gordon...). That deal eventually resulted in a new profit-structure at **Swannson Lumber**, along with a re-juggling of share ownership that seemed—on paper—to favor Mal, but in actual fact allowed Gerald to get a piece of Arnie's action. But all that blew up in Gerald's face after Mal died, because it looked like Cynthia would become the majority shareholder when Gordon's grandmother passed away—which Gerald expected to happen soon. He knew Arnie Andersen would offer Cynthia a good price for the lumberyard, if she decided to sell. Gerald didn't want to see that happen. He liked his new role as Kingsburg's undisputed King of the 2X4s, so he was having sex with Cynthia to keep her on his side, away from Arnie—an activity that also had curiously satisfying aftershocks on the old sibling rivalry front.*

Jeez, thought Gordon to himself. What's that old line about the "tangled webs we weave?"

(G.D.: "“Oh! what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive!” It's from ‘Marmion’ by Sir Walter Scott.”)

(G.: “Yeah. Thanks. It sounds a little cheesy when you telepathically ham it up like that.”)

(G.D.: “I used to regret what I'd done to you as the Easter Bunny, but no more.”)

Gordon's daimon was joking, of course. Daimons don't give a shit about anything they do to their human charges, so long as it helps their souls make progress.

Diving back into the information currents, the next mystery that Gordon tried to solve was what had happened to him on his Easter morning alien abduction aboard the low-rent flying saucer. But he found he couldn't go there.

(G.T.S.: “You're allowed to see that information only if you choose to die.”)

(G.: “Why? What's the big deal? I've already lived through it once.”)

(G.D.: “Yes, but you don't fully recall all that was done to you then. If you go back to life, you'll fight to find out what happened. And when you find out, you'll fight to prevent it from happening to anyone else. We'll

support you in that fight, but you might not have the courage for it if you know everything that it involves.”)

(G.: “Can’t you guys just clue me in now, then wipe out all my memories later—kind of like when I was born?”)

(G.D.: “Even here, such knowledge could change things. It might unfairly impact your decision to live or die.”)

(G.: “So you plan to just keep me in the dark?”)

(G.T.S.: “About that, yes. It’s Divine Will. But we can show you other aspects of your future.”)

(G.D.: “You’re in for some happiness, believe it or not.”)

Gordon watched as the light in front of him filled with the radiant face of a smart and elegant blonde woman with sad blue eyes who would become his future wife and cause him a lot of soul-forging trouble. He saw two beautiful laughing Chinese girls who would become his future daughters and teach him what it was like to know unconditional love. Then he saw himself moving into a penthouse apartment on Central Park West just before he and his future wife became engaged. As they were unpacking boxes in the kitchen, she held up a ceramic bunny head by its stiff white ears, saying, “This is one of my favorite things. Won’t it look good hanging over by the refrigerator?” He expressed his reservations by joking: “I kind of have a thing about rabbits... I had a bad experience with the Easter Bunny when I was a kid. Could we please not put that up?” His future wife leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

“Fuck off...” she said sweetly, “bunnies are nice.”

And then Gordon was right back staring at the bloody heap of himself crumpled on the floorboards of Lloyd’s Bentley, a disheveled wreath of seaweed in his hair and pinkish streams of saltwater bubbling from his nose. He had a choice to make. Soon. There was a sound like a birthday gift being unwrapped.

He chose to live.

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